SWIMMING PRETTY: THE SPECTACLE, STRENGTH, AND STAR TEXT OF ESTHER WILLIAMS

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

in the Department of Cinema and Media Studies of The Media School,

Indiana University

May 2020

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Acknowledgements

This was by far the hardest and most rewarding project I've ever had to undertake, so there are a few people I must really thank. First of all, there is my committee: Joan Hawkins, Gregory Waller, and Ryan Powell. It's been wonderful to have learned from them and to have their guidance, and I cannot thank my advisor, Ryan, enough for all he has done to help me with graduate school.

I also want to express my appreciation for my incredible bosses at Indiana University Cinema, Founding Director Jon Vickers and Associate Director Brittany D. Friesner. They have always allowed me to put my degree first, and I will forever cherish the memory of programming and screening *Easy to Love* in my favorite cinema.

To the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Margaret Herrick Library, specifically Edda Manriquez and Kristine Krueger, I offer my deepest appreciation. This thesis would not have been the same without their help. I also want to thank the Esther Williams estate for giving me permission to view specific materials from AMPAS. As a fan and as an academic, it was a joy to have access to these rare materials, and they were more crucial to my ideas than I could have imagined.

Finally, I have to thank my family, who had to endure my endless groaning, anxiety attacks, and stress for the past two years. When my mother introduced me to classic films as a kid, it changed my life. When my sister, Katelyn, gave me a copy of Esther's autobiography when I was eighteen, it changed my life again. Hopefully this thesis is a fitting culmination of those moments.

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As a champion swimmer-turned-movie star, Esther Williams had a fascinating career that encompassed her own film genre, the "aquamusical," and a complicated star text that presented her as a devoted wife and mother, a sensuous pin-up, an incredible athlete, and an ambitious, business-savvy careerwoman. With her athleticism, her strong, self-reliant characters, and her contributions to the construction of her own star text, Williams emerges as someone whose capabilities, bodily and otherwise, interrogate ideas of heteronormative romance, female strength and containment, and women as spectacle. While the aquamusical and Williams's swimming are without a doubt vital to this thesis, they limit one's perspective, and so other materials, such as her dramatic films, her TV work, fan magazines, and various ephemera, are brought in to further explain how the actress was such a destabilizing force on and off the screen.

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In 1941, a pretty, young woman went to the movies with her new husband to see the MGM spectacular *Ziegfeld Girl*. As they sat in the dark, the man was not particularly impressed, but his wife became beguiled by the breathtaking glamour of Lana Turner and Hedy Lamarr; Judy Garland's trembling rendition of "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows;" and the unforgettable musical numbers directed by Busby Berkeley. What made the experience even more overwhelming was that this woman—a champion swimmer, a former Olympic hopeful, and now an I. Magnin salesgirl—was being courted by MGM at that very moment.

Esther Williams didn't have stars in her eyes when it came to Hollywood. After swimming in Billy Rose's Aquacade alongside Johnny Weissmuller and witnessing the seedy side of show business firsthand, Esther wasn't enthusiastic when MGM initially came calling. But then she had second thoughts, thoughts that were only intensified when she had her husband Leonard take her to the movies one night. "*Ziegfeld Girl* was the most lavish and exciting musical film I'd ever seen," she later recalled, "and now I was being offered a chance to be a part of that world. … I was hooked on the possibility that all those dreams could actually come true."[1]

Those dreams did indeed come true. In 1942, Esther was introduced to moviegoers in *Andy Hardy's Double Life* (George B. Seitz); two years later, she had her first starring role in the Red Skelton vehicle *Mr. Co-Ed*. Convinced of the newcomer's star power, MGM quickly changed the title to *Bathing Beauty* and its success became just the beginning of Esther's singular film career. As the mermaid of Hollywood, she worked with MGM to create her own genre, the "aquamusical," producing films that revolved around her and her characters' intense athletic capabilities, unwavering independence, and immense self-confidence. With the

[1] Esther Williams with Digby Diehl, *The Million Dollar Mermaid* (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 66.

aquamusical, Esther established her own space in cinematic history in addition to her own space in the water. While her persona as a hardworking, autonomous woman is not unique in classic Hollywood—think Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, Katharine Hepburn—her skill in the water elevates her star text in a way that few actresses can claim. Physical strength and feminine resistance are signified by her body, a body that, while at the forefront of all of her publicity materials and films, works to destabilize ideas such as female containment, heteronormative romance, and women as spectacle.

Given how distinctive her career and star text are, it is puzzling that Esther is rarely discussed within film history or star studies. This absence is troubling because it obscures one of the most captivating careers that Hollywood has ever seen, as well as one of its most quietly subversive stars. While it is easy to be dazzled by her bright smile, swimsuited curves, and a filmography predominantly made up of improbably plotted, aesthetically pleasing musicals, a closer look reveals the toned muscles, sharp business sense, and autonomous attitude that help to complicate the perception that strong women weren't supported and idolized in classic Hollywood. An empowering presence on and off the screen, Esther personified the tensions between athleticism and eroticism, career ambition and domesticity, femininity and masculinity, and romance and independence.

Because of this, it becomes apparent that there are multiple approaches that need to be considered here. Feminist critique, for instance, presents a foundation for discussing the larger stakes in what Esther represented and promoted. Genre studies will also be considered due to her extensive work in musicals, as well as performance studies because of the immense focus that scholars, publicity materials, and her films place on her body as an athlete and as an actress. Perhaps the most vital lenses I will be employing are production details and film history, which

are further supplemented by additional sources like Esther's autobiography *The Million Dollar Mermaid* and various ephemera from the twenty-year period of her career, all invaluable in the perspective they provide. Finally, some textual analysis will be given of her filmography, in particular her non-aquamusicals and TV work, which are seldom explored in spite of the added depth they offer.

The Who, What, When, Where, and Why of the Aquamusical

To steal Keenan Wynn's opening line from *Neptune's Daughter* (Edward Buzzell, 1949), "I'd like to tell you the story of a guy, a girl, and a bathing suit," a story that is also known as the aquamusical. To understand how the genre came to be, we first need to travel back to Victorian England, where demonstrations of "ornamental" swimming enabled a group of young, working-class women to earn a living as performers and swimming instructors for other women. Around the same time in the U.S., audiences were bewitched by Australian champion swimmer Annette Kellerman, whose career in show business evolved from long-distance-swimming publicity stunts to vaudeville exhibitions of diving and swimming techniques to Hollywood films that put her in the water as mermaids and other mythical creatures.[2] Although Esther is often credited with creating synchronized swimming, it was in fact Kellerman and a physical education teacher named Katharine Curtis who brough the sport into being.[3] It was then Esther's former boss Billy Rose who "saw a golden opportunity to link the already popular Ziegfeld-esque 'girl show' with

[2] Esther rightly saw Kellerman as the woman who laid the foundation for her career and she gratefully played Kellerman in *Million Dollar Mermaid*, but their respective star texts and filmographies are quite different. One of the most fascinating parts of *Million Dollar Mermaid* is when the film does a montage of "Annette's" growing success as a performer and yet all of the clips are from Esther's previous aquamusicals, which effectively blurs the lines between the two women in a way that winds up emphasizing Esther's career over Kellerman's.

[3] Esther's films did, however, help to glamourize and popularize synchronized swimming, which eventually led to the sport's inclusion in the Olympics.

the rising interest in water-based entertainment."[4] He would debut the water ballet in 1937, two years before Esther joined his Aquacade.

In addition to Annette Kellerman, Olympic champions and fellow Billy Rose employees Johnny Weissmuller, Buster Crabbe, and Eleanor Holm[5] all made their way to Hollywood before Esther with varying degrees of success, but "none of them starred in films built around their specialty sport."[6] Weissmuller, who *Photoplay* declared in 1933 was proof that "swimmers have something pictures need,"[7] and Crabbe were firmly placed in the jungle to play Tarzan and similar wild men, which Crabbe was able to parlay into other action-filled roles like Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers. Holm, meanwhile, never managed to gain a foothold in Hollywood; the only film she truly acted in was, unsurprisingly, *Tarzan's Revenge* (D. Ross Lederman, 1938) opposite a track and field Olympian named Glenn Morris.

By the 1930s, many athletes, such as Jim Corbett, Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth, Gene Tunney, Jim Thorpe, and Gertrude Ederle, had failed to break into the movies;[8] one article speculated that the reason was that "the public is not interested in them as actors but only as record-breakers."[9] When Twentieth Century-Fox found a box-office sensation in ice-skating champion Sonja Henie, it came as a genuine surprise to Hollywood. Writing for *Silver Screen* in 1937, Ed Sullivan believed that Henie's success was because her film debut, *One in a Million*

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[4] Vicki Valosik, "Synchronized Swimming Has a History That Dates Back to Ancient Rome," Smithsonian.com, *Smithsonian Magazine*, August 12, 2016. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/synchronized-swimming-has-history-dates-back-ancient-rome-180960108/.

[5] It was Holm's place that Esther took when she was hired for the Aquacade. While Esther didn't know Crabbe, she and Weissmuller were partners in the Aquacade, which, according to her, exposed her to his relentless sexual harassment.

[6] Richard Corliss, "Bathing Beauty: The Wet and Wild Life of Esther Williams," *Time*, Time Entertainment, June 13, 2013. https://entertainment.time.com/2013/06/13/bathing-beauty-the-wet-and-wild-life-of-esther-williams/.

[7] Mac Miller, "Splashing into Films," *Photoplay*, July 1933, 39.

[8] Kirtley Baskette, "He's a Baer!" *Photoplay*, November 1933, 34.

[9] May Allison Quirk, "Muscling In," *Photoplay*, January 1933, 102.

(Sidney Lanfield, 1936), was a musical, which no other athlete had done before and which gave her a solid formula that her subsequent films could, and did, repeat. Sullivan also noted that "where Dempsey and Ruth appeared awkward in comparison with the matinee idols of moviedom, Miss Henie made the movie stars appear awkward in comparison with her spectacular skating." The article ended by praising Twentieth Century-Fox head Darryl Zanuck for signing Henie and remarking that other studios would do well to imitate Zanuck's idea of putting whatever athletes they hired into musicals.[10]

MGM's Louis B. Mayer didn't have to be told twice. "Melt the ice, get a swimmer, and make it pretty!" he told his underlings.[11] That pretty girl, of course, became Esther, "the sportswriter's dream: a gal who could not only swim like a feminine Weissmuller but looked terrific while doing it."[12] Even though the Tarzan series gave MGM a way to integrate some swimming into the story as the protagonist did such tasks as wrestling crocodiles or quickly swimming to the rescue of another character, Mayer couldn't envision Esther in this kind of setting. He knew that this wholesome-looking California girl wasn't right as "a jungle exotic;" instead, Jeanine Basinger writes, he wanted to "develop her into a major A-list MGM movie star—with a little swimming thrown in."[13]

For over a decade, Esther was the studio's mermaid. A record-breaking swimming champion who was on the path to competing in the 1940 Olympics before WWII forced their cancellation, she remains a fascinating figure for many reasons. Ensconced in a studio system that prided itself on the control it wielded, Esther's capabilities in the water gave her a power that translated into an irreplaceability that few in the system possessed. It wasn't uncommon for an

[10] Ed Sullivan, "Champions vs. the Screen," *Silver Screen*, June 1937, 22-23 and 63.
[11] Williams, 57.
[12] Kate Holliday, "The Essence of Esther," *Photoplay,* February 1945, 41.
[13] Jeanine Basinger, *The Movie Musical!* (New York: Knopf, 2019), 223.

actor to be replaced on a film due to pregnancy, an argument with their home studio, a nervous breakdown, and more.[14] Esther's position as Hollywood's sole swimming star afforded her a special place in the studio era.

One factor in her irreplaceability was the aquamusical, a hybrid of musical, romantic comedy, and swimming spectacle that was invented during WWII and became pure escapist fare for moviegoers. By the time Esther arrived in Hollywood, the film musical was "one of the industry's most prestigious and reliable products."[15] In the 1930s, it was defined by such creations as the "let's-put-on-a-show" antics of Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland; the impossible elegance and wit of Astaire and Rogers; the operatic stylings of Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy; Ernst Lubitsch's sophisticated, risqué romances; and the lavish, racy, fever dream-like extravaganzas of Busby Berkeley, the man who became one of Esther's most important collaborators. Towards the end of his career as a Broadway dance director, Berkeley developed "the elements of spectacle" that would become synonymous with his name, like his kaleidoscopic imagery, excessive set design, and giant chorus formations.[16] Concerning his film musicals from the early 1930s—e.g. *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933), *Footlight Parade* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933), *Dames* (Ray Enright, 1934), *Gold Diggers of 1935* (Berkeley, 1935)—Martin Rubin writes,

> Largely liberated from the necessities of serving plot, characterization, and cause-and-effect logic, with little or no obligation to maintaining the consistency of a fictional world, spectacle in Berkeley's numbers becomes an end in itself.[17]

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[14] Richard B. Jewell, *The Golden Age of Cinema: Hollywood, 1929-1945* (Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 256-257.
[15] Steven Cohan, "Introduction: Musicals of the Studio Era" in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader,* ed. Steven Cohan (New York: Routledge, 2007), 6.
[16] Martin Rubin, "Busby Berkeley and the Backstage Musical" in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, 54.
[17] Ibid, 60.

Although the aquamusical and its love of spectacle, especially when Berkeley was involved, would seem to adhere to this same concept, it only does to a point. To help ensure that these films found an audience, MGM once again looked at the template set by Sonja Henie and surrounded Esther with experienced musical performers.[18] This included the bands of Harry James, Tommy Dorsey, and Xavier Cugat, whose performances chiefly function as spectacle while James, Dorsey, and Cugat also play themselves in minor roles that give them little connection to the narrative. Another example of this is the specialty number performed by someone completely unrelated to the plot, such as Lena Horne singing "Baby, Come Out of the Clouds" at a nightclub and Eleanor Powell doing a tap-dance routine in *Duchess of Idaho* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1950).

The other musical performers who were placed into the aquamusical were actors like Red Skelton, Ricardo Montalbán, Betty Garrett, Tony Martin, and Howard Keel, people who could do the numbers required of a musical so that Esther was able to swim. (She did take voice lessons at MGM and would do a song or two in the occasional aquamusical, but more often than not the singing was left to others.) Their numbers, along with Esther's swimming, aren't always fully integrated into the narrative, but they are connected to plot and characterization in that they further the romance of specific characters, demonstrate a character's inner thinking (this primarily applies to dream sequences), or show how a character makes their living as a performer.

Although Berkeley didn't collaborate with Esther until 1949, it would seem that he influenced her early aquamusicals in terms of the style of her more extreme swimming routines, which is no surprise given his work on "By a Waterfall" (*Footlight Parade*) and "But We Must

[18] Basinger, 221.

Rise" (*The Kid from Spain*, Leo McCarey, 1932) The finale of *Bathing Beauty*, for example, is often mistakenly attributed to Berkeley when it was actually choreographed by Esther's Aquacade choreographer John Murray Anderson and directed by George Sidney. What Sidney does, though—and what was duplicated by Esther's aquamusical directors thereafter—was imitate Berkeley's "spectacularization of the camera," a technique that Rubin describes as intruding on numbers that are placed on a stage with trick cuts, reverse motion, and visuals that can only be achieved with camera angles,[19] which in Esther's case would be shots that are seen from underwater or high above the surface of the water (figures 1 and 2).

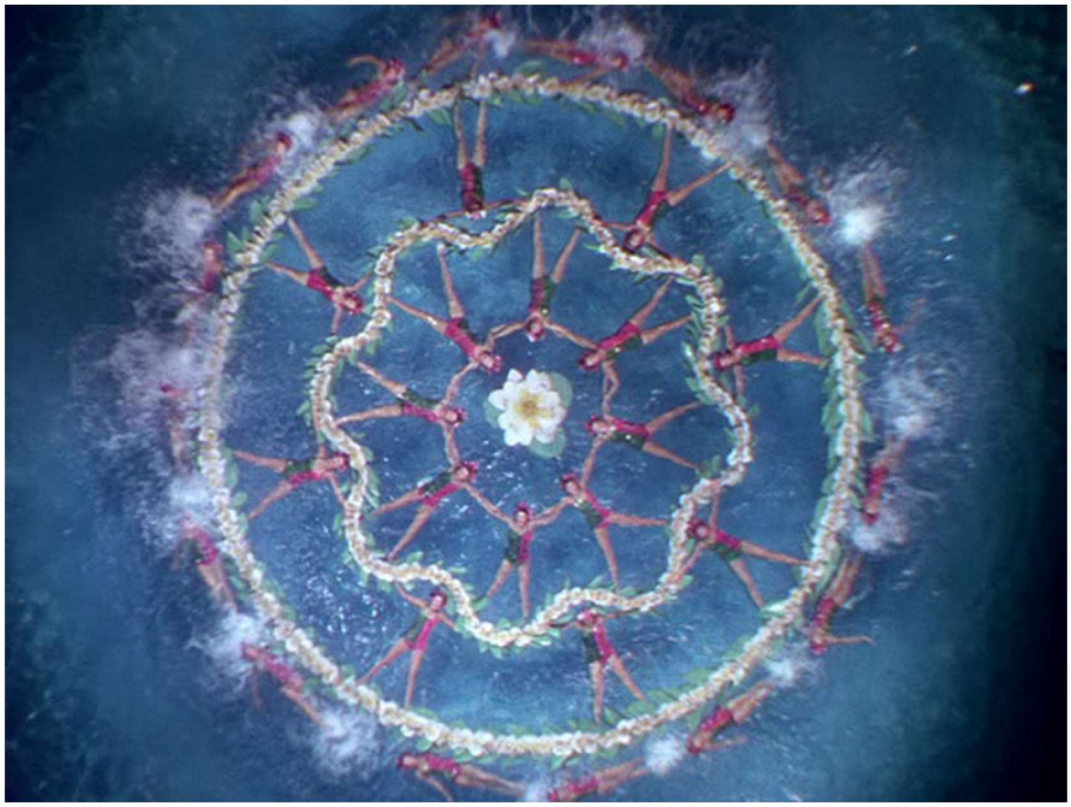

Figure 1: John Murray Anderson and George Sidney's finale from Bathing Beauty *(screen capture)*

[19] Rubin, 60.

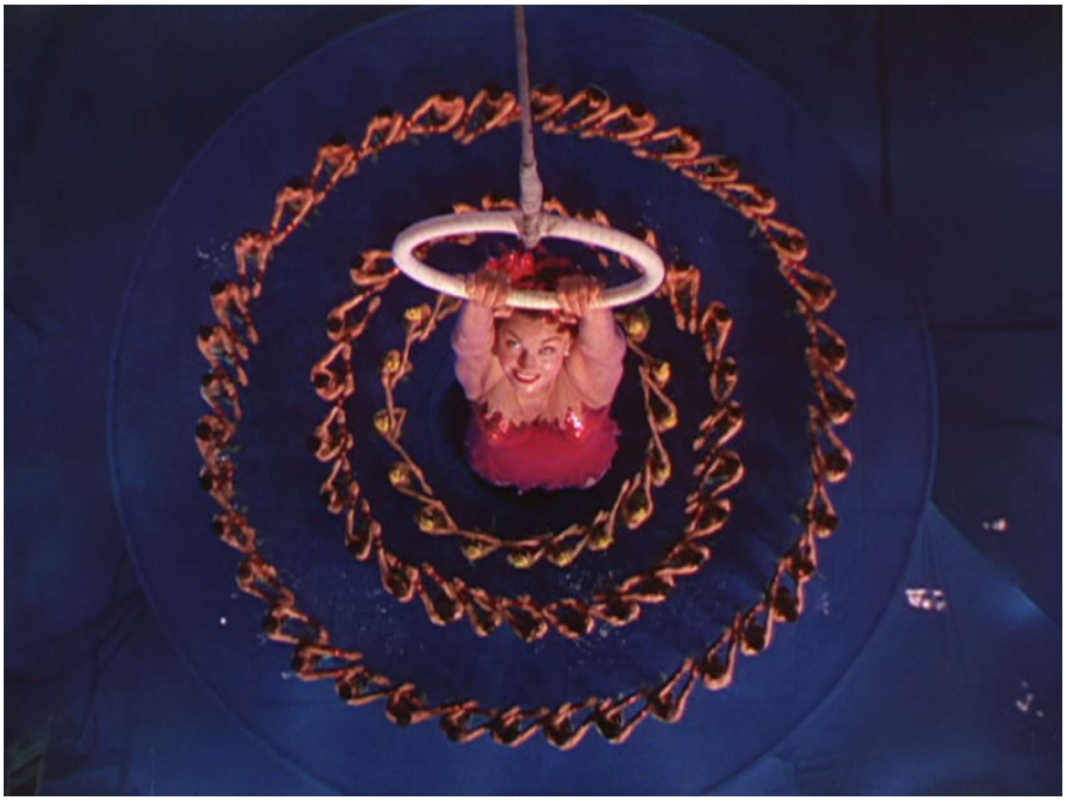

Figure 2: a Busby Berkeley number from Million Dollar Mermaid *(screen capture)*

The aquamusical exemplifies what Basinger calls "the star musical." Developed around the talents of a specific performer, the star musical was tailored to showcase that performer's persona and talent, and thus enabled the performer to be the auteur of their films.[20] Although reviewers and Esther herself often bemoaned the aquamusical's predictability in terms of plot, Cohan explains that every studio-era genre had this problem—it was just more common in the musical since narratives had to be condensed in order to accommodate all of the singing and dancing, which then led to recycled plot situations becoming "generic shorthand."[21] Throughout her career, Esther had to deal with her films being dismissed as fluff. "Swimming musicals were

[20] Basinger, 109.
[21] Cohan, 11.

fun and beautiful to look at and were clearly adored by the public, but they didn't win any Academy Awards," she once remarked.[22] When Patrick McGilligan asked screenwriter Dorothy Kingsley, who wrote seven of the aquamusicals, if they were considered "lesser vehicles" by MGM, she replied,

> No. There was the musical unit and there was the serious unit, but the musicals made great money. … The Esther Williams pictures were never taken that seriously, but she was popular. They were intended to get Esther into the theaters, they were spectacles, and they made a lot of money.[23]

In other words, their artistic merit was deemed dubious, but Esther's popularity and her box office clout couldn't be ignored. Indeed, only two of her twenty-two MGM films, *The Hoodlum Saint* (Norman Taurog, 1946) and *Jupiter's Darling* (George Sidney, 1955), ever lost money.[24] Ever aware of the gap between the aquamusical's critical reputation and its financial success, Esther once stated to a *LIFE* reporter, "I've never had a picture that was praised by *TIME* or *LIFE*. But I'm one of two women among the 10 top money-making stars, and you've got to do articles about me, don't you?"[25]

While the aquamusical stuck to the conventions of a musical, the addition of water made things more complex and, in a way, experimental. MGM invested thousands to create her unique brand of films, which demonstrates how Esther was prioritized as not only a successful studio commodity, but also as a star who could be depended on to carry her own films. Despite their

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[22] Williams, 288.
[23] Patrick McGilligan. "Dorothy Kingsley: The Fixer," in *Backstory 2: Interviews with Screenwriters of the 1940s and 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 125.
[24] This information was gleamed from the films' individual Wikipedia entries, whose budget and box-office numbers have been supplied by *The Eddie Mannix Ledger* via the Margaret Herrick Library. Esther's autobiography additionally confirms that these two films were her only financial failures at MGM.
[25] Robert Wernick, "The Mermaid Tycoon," *LIFE Magazine*, April 16, 1951, 144.

reputation for being trivial, Esther's aquamusicals required unbelievable craftsmanship and forced MGM to rethink how they made films in order to properly showcase her. She was given her own soundstage with a $250,000 pool that could be changed to fit whatever movie she was making. Over time, the studio built a specialized team that was comprised of cameramen with scuba experience; chorus girls who were trained to swim and who would form the first swimmer-dancer union in the Screen Actors Guild in 1949; and makeup and hair artists who learned what specific materials were needed to keep Esther looking glamorous while wet, like welt-inducing hair pins and a mixture of baby oil and Vaseline to preserve her makeup.[26] In the late 1940s, she inspired the creation of waterproof mascara when German company Leichner released a product called Wimperlack that was developed exclusively so that Esther's mascara wouldn't streak when it came into contact with the water.[27]

There is a technical ingenuity to the aquamusical and a striving to go beyond what audiences had seen before, which is inspired and made possible by Esther's athleticism. In the aquamusical, there is typically a showstopper, a number that takes full advantage of the creative and financial resources of MGM, such as Esther swimming with the animated Tom and Jerry in *Dangerous When Wet* (Charles Walters, 1953); her floating amongst the clouds in the sky in *Pagan Love Song* (Robert Alton, 1950); the amorous statues who come to life and chase her underwater in *Jupiter's Darling*; her imaginary swim through the air of Howard Keel's hotel room in *Texas Carnival* (Charles Walters, 1951); and the incredible fountains and colors of many films, including *Bathing Beauty*, *Million Dollar Mermaid* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1952), and *Duchess of Idaho*.

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[26] Williams, 201-202.
[27] Alexandra Penney, "Beauty," *The New York Times* (Manhattan, NY), Oct. 23, 1977. https://www.nytimes.com/1977/10/23/archives/beauty-secret-sources.html.

There is no denying what the main attraction is when watching an Esther Williams musical because every element is there to emphasize her talent and athleticism. This is important to note due to Esther's persona as a resilient, independent, and ambitious woman. While that particular persona isn't hers alone to claim, what sets Esther apart is her extraordinary prowess as an athlete. She represented a type of femininity where a woman could be physically strong without losing her desirability, her mobility, and her agency. Her co-stars seldom had as much clout at the box office as her, enabling her to take control of the film. By her eighth film, *Fiesta* (Richard Thorpe, 1947), her name was billed first, as it would be for the rest of her career. With the exception of Fernando Lamas—who was a former competitive swimmer in Argentina—no man could keep up with Esther in the water, which helped to mark the space as distinctively hers. The water reinforced her strength as it displayed her powerful body and highlighted her inimitable talent. The fact that both MGM and Cypress Gardens, a real tourist attraction in Florida that was the setting for *Easy to Love* (Charles Walters, 1953) and her 1960 TV special, built expensive, lavish pools for her to use is indicative of her power in Hollywood, but also her ability to create a space that was hers alone.

Although Esther's irreplaceability gave her a one-of-a-kind quality, it also made immense demands on her body. Because aquamusicals were new territory for MGM, they entrusted Esther to sometimes come up with her own choreography and assumed that she could do anything that was related to the water. This was demonstrated on *Easy to Love* when the studio and Busby Berkeley, who created and directed the finale, told Esther she had to water-ski in the film, ignoring the fact that she didn't know how and that, as she detailed in her autobiography, swimming necessitated a whole different skill set than water-skiing.[28]

[28] Williams, 245-246.

Perhaps inevitably, Esther's irreplaceability proved risky in that she allowed herself to be put in dangerous situations because it was clear that the film's existence depended upon her, and, since no one else was doing what she was doing, her directors and costume designers were ignorant of any possible complications that their choices triggered. This led to numerous near-death experiences such as getting trapped underwater by a faulty set design, almost drowning from wearing a heavy flannel bathing suit, escaping getting speared on water jet needles, and breaking her neck during a dive thanks to the metal crown attached to her costume. In addition to all of that, Esther ruptured her eardrums five times, broke a toe from clenching a swing fifty feet in the air, and completed four aquamusicals while pregnant.

Writing about how she survived the danger-filled production of *Pagan Love Song*, Esther compared herself to the infamous queen of silent action serials, Pearl White: "…I felt as though I had inherited Pearl White's mantle. Part actress, part stuntwoman, I knew I was doing all this on my own, and that's how it was always going to be. No guys were going to save me."[29] Kara Elizabeth Fagan believes that Esther's choice to align herself with the silent-era serial stars, women who have been identified by film scholars as "the first action heroines," is an intriguing one to consider.[30] The relationship between the musical and action films has been made by scholars before. Both genres, for instance, rely on the use of the spectacle, and there is a similarity in the way that action sequences and musical numbers function.[31] For Fagan, Esther's comment about Pearl White shows a link between her aquamusical characters and the action heroine "because of the tensions created when her seemingly autonomous and active female

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[29] Williams, 192.
[30] Kara Elizabeth Fagan, *The Spectacle of Female Athleticism in Classic Hollywood, 1935-1955*, (University of Iowa, PhD dissertation, 2016), 129.
[31] An example of this kind of analysis is José Arroyo's "Mission: Sublime" (*Action/Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. José Arroyo [London: British Film Institute, 2000]).

body simultaneously functions as spectacle."[32] As Yvonne Tasker points out, it is difficult to transform an "eroticized female image" like Esther's "from pin-up into 'action.'"[33] However, while Esther's surface image was one of a pin-up, her active body, stunt work, and self-identification as an action heroine akin to Pearl White attest that she could make that transformation successfully.

Unfortunately, it cannot be said that Esther did all of the labor she seemed to do in her films. In her autobiography, she reveals that during production of *Bathing Beauty*, when her stand-in couldn't manage to tread water and hold a prop at the same time, she told director George Sidney, "My stand-in has to be a swimmer, not an actress." She then reached out to former teammate Edith Mortridge, who became a close friend and accompanied Esther on all of her films thereafter.[34] What isn't divulged, though, is how often Mortridge doubled the actress. Basinger notes that there have been rumors that Esther "never did her own diving unless it was off a low board or the side of the pool,"[35] which two-time co-star and friend Cyd Charisse confirmed in her memoir, writing that although Esther was capable of doing the dives, her multiple ruptured eardrums made it "physically impossible," thus the necessity of a double.[36] This claim is potentially substantiated by the numerous times in Esther's films when she is shown on a diving board only to have the camera cut to a wide shot while the actual dive is performed, making it difficult to affirm the diver's identity. Compounding this is the fact that doubles in classic Hollywood were almost never given onscreen credit. A glance at the American Film Institute's online catalog shows that on both *Thrill of a Romance* (Richard Thorpe, 1945)

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[32] Fagan, 125.
[33] Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender, Sexuality in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 70.
[34] Williams, 108.
[35] Basinger, 224.
[36] Tony Martin and Cyd Charisse, *The Two of Us* (New York: Mason/Charter, 1976), 206.

and *This Time for Keeps* (Thorpe, 1947), Esther's diving was doubled by Ruth Nurmi[37] and Ruth Jump respectively.[38]

The only times Esther admits she didn't do a stunt were when they were ridiculously dangerous, such as in *Jupiter's Darling*, when her character tries to escape from Carthaginian soldiers by jumping off a cliff with her horse and plunging into the ocean. A platform diver she knew named Al Lewin did the job—and promptly broke his back.[39] According to Bernard F. Dick, synchronized swimmer Mary Zellner doubled Esther in this same sequence as her character swims underwater through rough waves and rocky reefs.[40] Zellner verified this in a 2013 interview and additionally revealed that although she and Esther, whom she idolized, interacted with one another off-camera, they were "not permitted to be photographed together because MGM didn't want the public to know that [Esther] had a double."[41]

Another stunt Esther decided to avoid was diving eighty feet from a helicopter into the center of a V-formation of professional water-skiers for *Easy to Love*'s grand finale while pregnant. Esther asserted that she did everything else in this finale, including getting pulled out of the water by the helicopter, but she had professional diver Helen Crelinkovich hired to complete the actual dive.[42] Her personal home movies, however, tell a slightly different story. Although her behind-the-scenes footage of *Easy to Love*'s production does show Esther practicing her water-skiing and subsequently filming the finale, there is an incredible shot of her giddily posing with a man who is wearing an exact replica of her finale costume, pink swimsuit

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[37] "Thrill of a Romance," AFI Catalog.
[38] "This Time for Keeps," AFI Catalog.
[39] Williams, 261.
[40] Bernard F. Dick, *That Was Entertainment: The Golden Age of the MGM Musical* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 175.
[41] Regina Ford, "Stand-In for a Star: Esther Williams' Double Still a Water Babe," *Green Valley News*, June 8, 2013, https://www.gvnews.com/news/local/stand-in-for-a-star-esther-williams-double-still-a/article_1a1626aa-d081-11e2-a80c-0019bb2963f4.html.
[42] Williams, 251.

and all. He is then recorded doing ski-jumps off of a ramp, which would infer that Esther's two ski-jumps in the finale, filmed in that telltale wide shot, were not performed by her.

Curiously enough, although she had no problem discussing how her pregnancy necessitated hiring Helen Crelinkovich, it is obvious to Kirsten Pullen (and myself) that the comedic clown routine Esther performs in *Easy to Love* was also doubled. With her hair placed under a curly orange wig and her face obscured by white makeup and a red nose, Esther's character Julie performs a kids' show that has her playing with a trained seal, balancing on a precariously tilted chair, doing flips on a trampoline, and executing belly flops left and right, making it the most ungraceful, unglamorous routine in Esther's oeuvre. Not only is it highly unlikely that the expectant mother would've attempted such physicality, Pullen points out that you can tell the moments where Esther was replaced by a man because of their different body types.

Pullen believes that Esther hid the truth about this scene precisely because she was doubled by a man,[43] but such an argument doesn't explain why she would also hide the contributions of the female divers. I would offer that the notion that "the star had to do everything better than everybody else," which was an attitude perpetuated by the studios and mentioned in both Esther's autobiography and her *Private Screenings* interview, could have also played a part in her decision to keep mum. Because it is tricky to verify all of the instances of when Esther was doubled, the labor of people like Mortridge, Nurmi, Jump, and more is made invisible in order to bolster the perception of what Esther was capable of, and it is an erasure that the actress herself participated in.[44] It is interesting to consider that, particularly in the clown

[43] Kirsten Pullen, *Like a Natural Woman: Spectacular Female Performance in Classical Hollywood* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 66.

[44] While it doesn't appear that she ever mentioned it, Esther's singing voice was also dubbed, or doubled, by Jo Ann Greer in *Jupiter's Darling* and by Betty Wand in both *Easy to Love* and *Pagan Love Song*. In my opinion,

routine, the filmmakers, MGM, and apparently even Esther trusted that they could pass off the doubles' immense physicality as her own, taking advantage of the fact that her hard work and athleticism were well-publicized. With that in mind, it makes something like the clown routine even more bizarre because it demonstrates a conviction that the substitution of Esther with a taller, leaner man doing flips and handstands on a chair would never be noticed, despite its obviousness—and it would seem that they were right to be so confident since no reviews or articles I have found mention any suspicion of doubling.

Along with her swimming and diving, what helped to accentuate Esther's athleticism in the aquamusical was the "sporty montage." In works like *Thrill of a Romance, Easy to Wed, Duchess of Idaho*, and her 1960 TV special *Esther Williams at Cypress Gardens*, her character and her romantic interest do a series of activities (boating, horseback riding, skiing, parasailing, dancing, hiking, shooting skeet) that serve as the backdrop for the deepening of their relationship. The "sporty montage" also worked to show off the settings of the aquamusical, which were typically posh resorts and locations like Mexico, Florida, Tahiti (actually Hawaii), and Sun Valley, Idaho. A third purpose for this montage is that it presents Esther as a woman who is active constantly and who enjoys all sorts of healthy and entertaining activities. This extended to her publicity. The "sporty montage" could be found in such magazine articles and photo spreads as "Some Guests are Special!"[45] and "*Modern Screen* Goes to Arrowhead Springs"[46] (figure 3). Another version of it was a 1950 coloring book produced by children's book company Merrill with permission from MGM. Some pages depict scenes from Esther's

though, it sounds as if Wand's work in *Pagan Love Song* was solely on the two numbers of Esther's that were ultimately cut (but are still available to hear as a DVD extra). Ironically enough, Esther's husband Ben occasionally did this type of dubbing for the likes of George Montgomery, Dana Andrews, and Victor Mature.

[45] Frank Bogert, "Some Guests are Special!" *Modern Screen,* August 1948.

[46] "*Modern Screen* Goes to Arrowhead Springs," *Modern Screen,* July 1947.

films while others show her in everyday life (two illustrations even include her real pet cocker spaniel!), but they all feature her gardening, swimming, canoeing, playing baseball, and having fun at the beach.

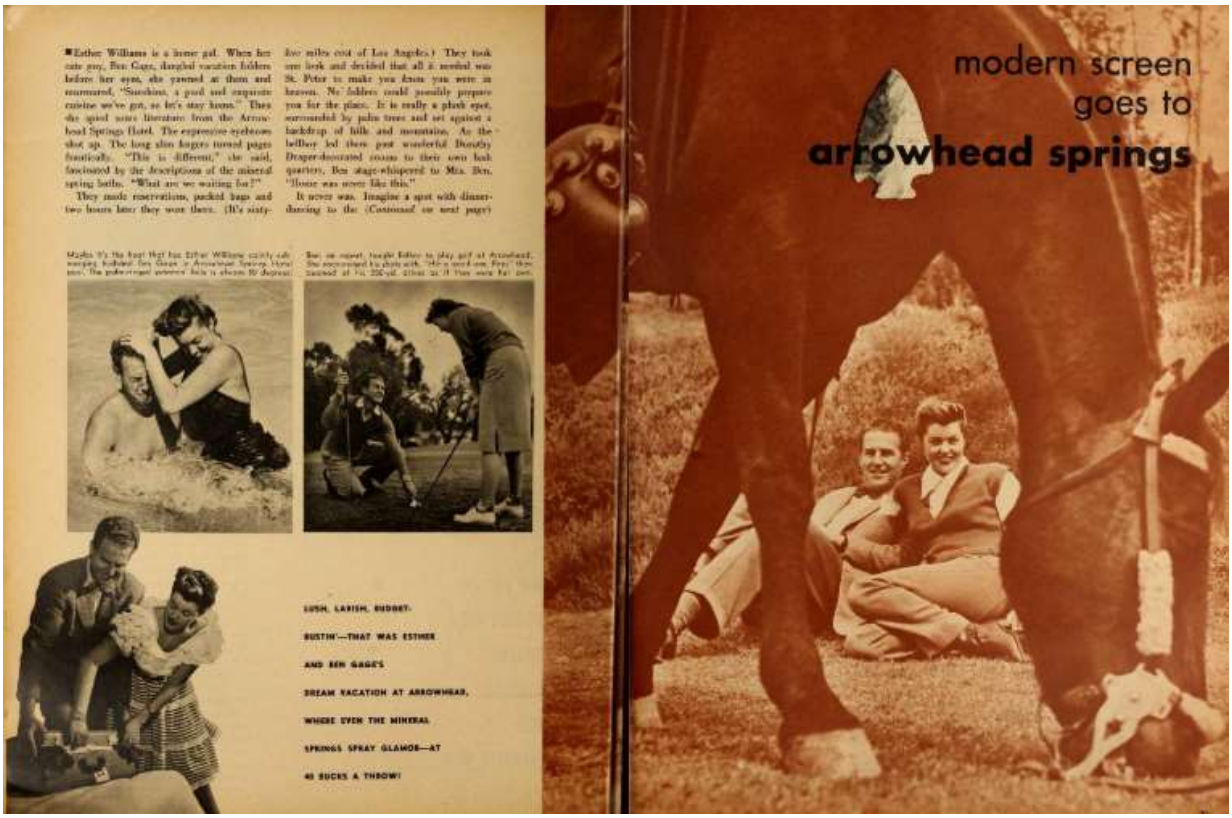

Figure 3: *"*Modern Screen *Goes to Arrowhead Springs" magazine spread,* Modern Screen*, July 1947 (Media History Digital Library)*

Beauty, Brains, and Brawn: The Star Text of Esther Williams

In his formative text on star studies, Richard Dyer writes, "A star image is made out of media texts that can be grouped together as promotion, publicity, films and criticism and commentaries."[47] Weaved together, these categories are the foundation of the star, a performer

[47] Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 60.

like Esther whose fame and career embody specific cultural and historical mores and ideologies. Always in disbelief of her career, Esther thought MGM's interest in her was "funny" and remarked,

> I would have understood perfectly if they said, "We're sorry, you didn't have any training, you never even wanted to be an actress. We should've seen that. Go back home and be a lifeguard or something." And it would've been fine with me because they'd be right.[48]

To be a star in classic Hollywood, one had to undergo a glamorization process by their studio.[49] To Esther, Lana Turner was the "perfect product of the factory [MGM]," a woman who went from being discovered at Schwab's Pharmacy to becoming one of the most stylish, well-known actresses in the world.[50] Esther went through a similar transformation and described MGM as "the college education my family couldn't pay for," an education that included lessons in singing, dancing, and acting. Although the studio groomed her, she still managed to take charge of herself by putting a stipulation in her contract that said she wouldn't make her first film for nine months: "If it took nine months for a baby to be born, I figured my 'birth' from Esther Williams the swimmer to Esther Williams the movie actress would not be much different."[51]

At the beginning of *Easy to Love*, Van Johnson and another man are admiring Esther's character from afar when Johnson says, "What do you see in that girl? I'll tell you. All that's beautiful, clean, decent, desirable, wholesome, and commercial." He might as well have been talking about Esther herself. Once described as an underwater Doris Day,[52] her sunny, all-

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[48] "Esther Williams," *Private Screenings*, Turner Classic Movies, 1996.
[49] Jewell, 258.
[50] Williams, 79.
[51] Williams, 73.
[52] Corliss, "The Wet and Wild Life of Esther Williams."

American persona was wholeheartedly embraced by audiences who loved how she embodied a star text that was a mixture of the leggy pin-up, the dutiful mother and wife, the glamorous movie star, the shrewd businesswoman, and the mesmerizing athlete. In ways that were both intentional and unintentional, Esther helped to shape the persona that MGM had crafted for her, demonstrating an understanding and an agency about her career for which classic Hollywood stars are not always given credit.

A valuable example of this is her collection of annotated magazine article drafts that are housed in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Margaret Herrick Library. Although the studios' publicity departments worked with fan magazines to, in the words of Esther, "buff up the public image of the stars, airbrushing us into these perfect people for audiences to idolize,"[53] these annotated articles suggest that the stars, or at the very least Esther, had a hand in the construction of their publicity. Covered with grammatical corrections, fact checks, notes to the reporter, and, in some instances, completely rewritten paragraphs, Esther's annotations complicate her star text because it reveals that she explicitly contributed to and approved the publication of such articles as Maxine Block's 1952 piece "Are You Still Miss Instead of Mrs.?" wherein Esther advises the female reader on how to snag that all-important husband, an idea that is in contrast with the independence and professional ambition of her cinematic characters.

Behind the scenes, Esther frequently contributed to her films by participating in the designs of her swimsuits and adding to her screenplays. *Modern Screen* disclosed that she attended script meetings,[54] while Esther divulged in her autobiography that she "tried to make improvements [to her scripts] with a few changes" whenever she disliked the material written for

[53] Williams, 243.
[54] Jane Wilkie, "Wet She Is—Dry She Ain't!" *Modern Screen,* September 1953, 60.

her.[55] For *The Big Show* (James B. Clark, 1961), she produced nine pages of revisions, which were ignored,[56] and it was reported that she also insisted on writing her own dialogue for the film, too.[57] On *Skirts Ahoy!* (Sidney Lanfield, 1952), she suggested to screenwriter Isobel Lennart that a scene of the WAVES-in-training doing exercises on a field be changed to a swim class in order to give the film another scene of her in the water, explaining, "I knew what the audience expected from me." Lennart also asked Esther "lots of questions about how I felt about loyalty and love, and she wove those ideas into the script."[58]

Later, Esther co-produced and devised the concept for her 1956 TV special *The Esther Williams Aqua Special*,[59] whose success eventually led to the special *Esther Williams in Cypress Gardens,* which gave her the most control out of all of her projects. She selected the location, produced it, conceived the show's story, and had a hand in its editing. She also stated that she became the uncredited director after the man who NBC assigned to her, Alan Handley, proved incompetent and she fired him.[60] In an interview with Diane Sawyer, Esther mentioned that she directed herself on one of her films as well when her director fell asleep, but she doesn't reveal the film.[61] In 1953, she co-created a story about a reincarnated goddess with screenwriter Leo Pogostin and director Charles Walters as a vehicle for herself. While she was away on maternity leave, though, MGM's new head Dore Schary gave the property, titled *Athena*, to Jane Powell and Esther, Pogostin, and Walters were denied a story credit.[62]

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[55] Williams, 133.
[56] Williams, 326-327.
[57] Hedda Hopper, "Garner Gets Offer to Co-Star with Marilyn," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* January 30, 1961, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, https://search.proquest.com/docview/182780328.
[58] Williams, 204-205.
[59] "Big Splash on TV," *TV Guide,* August 25-31, 1956, 11.
[60] Williams, 314-316 and 323.
[61] Diane Sawyer, "I Get to Spend the Day…Swimming with Esther Williams," *Good Morning America* (2007).
[62] Williams, 257-258.

One of Esther's more vital collaborators was Dorothy Kingsley. Unlike most of her films' writers, Esther observed, Kingsley would consult her before making changes and they quickly respected one another: "She had a real feeling for the needs of leading ladies, and she was willing to work with me to get a script we were both happy with." Together, they rewrote the confrontation scene between Esther and Lucille Ball's characters in the *Libeled Lady* (Jack Conway, 1936) remake *Easy to Wed* (Edward Buzzell, 1946) because they agreed it didn't sound like how women really talk to one another,[63] and Esther was part of the story conferences for *Jupiter's Darling*.[64] For the end of the English Channel race sequence in *Dangerous When Wet*, it was Esther who supplied its dramatic conclusion to Kingsley after seeing news coverage of long-distance swimmer Florence Chadwick breaking her Catalina Channel record with the help of her friend Johnny Weissmuller, who jumped into the water to pace her to the finish line.[65] In many of the Kingsley-penned aquamusicals, you can find details that are directly inspired by Esther's own life: *On an Island with You* (Richard Thorpe, 1948) has a plot point about Esther's character visiting with WWII soldiers, which she did in 1944, and even reproduces the exact routine she did to entertain them; *Neptune's Daughter* finds her playing a champion swimmer who reluctantly gives up competing for a new business venture, mirroring Esther's own hesitancy to leave competing behind for Hollywood;[66] and in *Texas Carnival*, it is revealed that her character had been swimming in a water pageant show when she was discovered by her carnival act partner, which is similar to how MGM found her in the Aquacade.

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[63] Williams, 133.
[64] John Franceschina, "The Life of an Elephant," in *Hermes Pan: The Man Who Danced with Fred Astaire* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 189.
[65] Williams, 236-237.
[66] Around the time that *Neptune's Daughter* went into production, Esther began working with swimsuit manufacturer Cole of California, so there is a possibility that her work for them was why her character Eve becomes a swimsuit designer. Esther does mention in her book that she had Cole make the suits that the female swimmers are wearing in the finale (Williams 176), plus there are advertisements Esther made for Cole in the background of Eve's office.

Kingsley's mixing of Esther's real and reel lives helped contribute to the naturalism that permeates Esther's star text. Naturalism, Pullen explains, is an acting style that closes the gap between the performer and their character to "present motivated actions and genuine emotion."[67] Pullen's exploration of the function of naturalism in select actresses' careers, including Esther's, focuses on the alignment between a star's acting and their roles. This allowed Esther to play herself essentially, blurring the distinctions between performance and self, and encouraging a form of authenticity that champions the idea of Esther and her characters being one and the same. With collaborators like Kingsley, Esther was able to have some control over her star image and could try to shape it in her film work.

That control didn't just extend to her movies, though. If you were an actor under contract, you weren't entitled to any money that the studio made from your countless advertisements and public appearances. Esther was weary of the "never-ending photo sessions and interviews with fan magazines" and called fan mail "a measure of how successful a job the publicity department had done."[68] To counteract how the studio profited off of her popularity without compensating her, she struck up a relationship with swimsuit manufacturing company Cole of California to be a spokesperson and made sure *she* received her earnings, not MGM,[69] thus making her one of the first stars to get an independent income from endorsements.[70] Esther's subsequent business ventures were chronicled in a 1951 *LIFE Magazine* article famously titled "The Mermaid Tycoon." In one of the piece's photo spreads, the actress is segmented into "Garagewoman Esther," pictured with second husband Ben Gage at the 1948 opening of their service station;

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[67] Pullen, 4.
[68] Williams, 74.
[69] Williams, 173-174.
[70] David Fantle and Tom Johnson, "In the Swim: Esther Williams, May 1996," in *Reel to Real* (Middleton: Badger Books, Inc., 2004), 103.

"Restauranteur Esther," again accompanied by Ben as they inspect the kitchen of their popular eatery The Trails; and "Industrialist Esther," who is shown looking over plans at her metal products plant.[71] (In her autobiography, Esther remarked about the article, "They showed me as everything but 'Exhausted Esther,' which is who I really was much of the time."[72]) The article also comments that "there has never been a tycoon, outside of a movie, at once so pretty and so precociously apt at turning over a quick buck as Esther."[73] This kind of sexist backhanded compliment appeared often whenever journalists decided to write about Esther's entrepreneurship. These writers were amazed that beauty and brains were not mutually exclusive, but underneath their awe is also a resentment that Esther is a successful businesswoman on top of being a movie star. For example, *TV Guide*'s 1956 article "Big Splash on TV" says that when Esther performs her new TV special, there will be "figurative dollar bills clutched between her toes."[74] A write-up of her 1960 special can't believe that she convinced Cypress Gardens manager Dick Pope to construct a $500,000 pool that he then paid her to swim in, the article commenting that one of Esther's "more remarkable achievements is a wide-eyed ability to talk people into building expensive pools for her."[75] Other businesses that Esther branched out into were swimming pools and designing her own brand of swimsuits, a brand that is still active to this day.

Of course, despite her business expertise, for many Esther's brains aren't nearly as fascinating as her body. Though she did have a remarkable figure, there is more than meets the eye when it comes to Esther's body. Symbolizing such concepts as female strength, female

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[71] Wernick, 140.
[72] Williams, 200.
[73] Wernick, 144.
[74] "Big Splash on TV," *TV Guide*, 9.
[75] "Miss Williams Takes a Dive," *TV Guide*, August 6-12, 1960, 18.

sexuality, procreation, and, as a victim of rape from age thirteen to fifteen, sexual assault survival, her body is a site of labor and trauma. Her ability to perform feats of athleticism while pregnant also underscore the work that women put their bodies through as mothers, working professionals, and more. It isn't unusual for a performer's body to be foregrounded, particularly if you were a woman in classic Hollywood. Your beauty and glamour would be touted in magazines and advertisements, while your films would feature close-ups in gauzy soft focus, a perpetual halo of light around your perfect head of hair, demonstrating the "to-be-looked-at-ness" that Laura Mulvey's 1975 piece "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" would argue contributes to the male gaze. For Esther, being a swimmer means your body is on constant display, whether in the water or when wearing your hundredth swimsuit for yet another photo session. Her athleticism leads to a more intense gaze being placed on her personhood, but there is definite power in this for Esther. In her study of early sports cinema, Stacy Lynn Tanner points out that in the films she examined, which included *Fiesta* and *Million Dollar Mermaid*, the female athlete is commanding and assertive, characteristics that stem from her experience in sports, such as training.[76] The female athlete is "a threat to the patriarchal order" because she problematizes what it traditionally means to be feminine, which causes an athlete like Esther to become "an important site of resistance in 20th century American film."[77]

Because she was the only aquamusical star, Esther is differentiated from the other female stars of her time and thus emerges as someone who didn't conform to the expected career of a Hollywood actress. This idea extends to her characters as well, such as the aquatic performers she played in *Bathing Beauty, This Time for Keeps, On an Island with You, Neptune's Daughter,*

[76] Stacy Lynn Tanner, *On the Replay: The Paradox of the Reel Female Athlete in Early American Women's Sport Cinema, 1924-1965* (Florida State University, PhD dissertation, 2013), 103.
[77] Tanner, vii-viii.

Duchess of Idaho, Texas Carnival, Million Dollar Mermaid, and *Easy to Love*; the dairy farmer-turned-English Channel swimmer of *Dangerous When Wet*; and the baseball team owner of *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* (Busby Berkeley, 1949). There is also *Fiesta*'s aspiring bullfighter Maria, whose beloved brother disappears after a family dispute and thus inspires her to impersonate him in the ring in the hopes that it'll cause him to return. When Maria becomes injured by a bull in one of the last scenes, Tanner sees it as a "consequence of [her] nonconformity,"[78] and yet Maria's ability to accomplish what she set out to do—bullfight, find her brother, restore her family's reputation, and marry her fiancé—regardless of the consequences can't be ignored. The same notion applies to many of Esther's characters. Whether it be physical hardships, romantic complications, or even a threat to her life, these women overcome whatever obstacles or consequences that arise and get the happy endings they want.

When she began performing for Billy Rose's Aquacade, Esther was told to "swim pretty" instead of using the fast style necessary for competitions. Although Rose liked the look of swimming pretty, Esther said that he was ignorant of the muscles and stamina required to do such movement: "Unlike fast swimming, it was a series of isometric maneuvers high on the surface in order to maintain stability in the water. It was not a natural swimming position."[79] Having developed a strong kick that kept her head and torso elevated, Esther ultimately found herself making a career out of this unnatural method of swimming. She depicted swimming pretty as something effortless and graceful rather than difficult and physically demanding. One of the most significant aspects of her performances is that from the very start of her career, Esther demonstrated comfort with her body and delight with her swimming. In other words, although her time in the water could be construed as spectacle or objectification, Esther

[78] Tanner, 58.
[79] Williams, 44.

presented her swimming as something that pleased *her* as well as her audience,[80] thus allowing her to reclaim her body as her own.

Esther's labor was frequently discussed in her publicity, which characterized her as a "hard worker, quick thinker, and blunt talker."[81] The pressbook for *Easy to Love* repeatedly mentions the work Esther did to learn waterskiing for the film and boasts that by that point in her life she had swum a total of 25,000 miles. Magazine stories also detailed how many months of rehearsal and production went into the aquamusicals. Esther's ability to do her labor-intensive films while pregnant was newsworthy, too. One reporter admired, "There are few women who…would have the will to forget nausea in order to waterski for the cameras."[82] Another article talks about how Esther still stayed active in her final months of pregnancy by teaching visually handicapped children how to swim and designing her new house, remarking, "Because it's Esther she hasn't been doing any of the things you'd expect an expectant mother to do."[83] A story about Esther and her husband Ben Gage's happy marriage is accompanied by an image of a pregnant Esther knitting in her dressing room while wearing her swimsuit and hairpiece for the finale of *Neptune's Daughter*,[84] aptly illustrating how the wife/mother, pin-up, and careerwoman aspects of her star text could converge (figure 4). This kind of publicity was just another contributor to the concept of Esther as a singular star, in addition to underscoring how her body carried meanings of motherhood, domesticity, and physical strength and activity.

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[80] Pullen, 79.
[81] "Venus with Arms," *TV Guide*, May 18-24, 1957, 10.
[82] "Wet She Is—Dry She Ain't!" 60.
[83] Kate Holliday, "Mermaid-in-Waiting," *Photoplay,* September 1949, 36.
[84] Esther Williams, "This Love of Ours," *Modern Screen*, April 1949.

Figure 4: Esther knitting in her dressing room, "This Love of Ours," Modern Screen*, April 1949 (Media History Digital Library)*

According to Amy Herzog, Esther's films are more exploitive than empowering, partly because the aquamusical is "governed by irrationality" and "an excessive objectification of the human body."[85] Although Esther's body is integrated as spectacle, Pullen argues that her appearance "supports narratives of strong, independent women,"[86] which leads the author to recognize the value in looking at Esther's characters out of the water as well as in, revealing the feminist narratives and feminine resistance that are at play in Esther's filmography.[87] For Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca's examination of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953),

[85] Amy Herzog, "Becoming-Fluid: History, Corporeality, and the Musical Spectacle," in *Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 165.
[86] Pullen, 69.
[87] Ibid, 80.

they find that resistance is key to the feminist pleasure they take in the film as Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell reject male objectification by returning the gaze; standing with an authoritative stance; controlling their own space and entering men's spaces; and staying active.[88] Pullen exemplifies that Esther did this too by looking at how she used her body's strength, size, and shape to reveal her characters' motivations and relationships.[89] According to *Modern Screen*, Esther was "proud of her height and capitalizes on it without making the fellows feel she's bigger than they are mentally or physically," which she accomplished by "being able to do anything the men can do—but not *quite* so well!"[90] Pullen helps to contradict this misogynistic statement in a key passage where she examines how Esther would shrink and expand her body throughout *Dangerous When Wet* to signal her femininity and her athleticism.[91] For Fagan, this kind of duality is legible to the audience as equal parts passive spectacle and active heroine,[92] an idea that Tania Modleski would say is indicative of Teresa de Lauretis's "double desire" concept. Identifying with both the passive/female object and the active/typically male subject, female spectators experience a "double desire" that alters how they experience a film.[93]

Esther and her body communicated an untraditional kind of femininity, one where a man wanted to marry you because you could dazzle him with your athleticism and self-sufficiency and where success came to you because you pursued it with unrelenting intelligence and skill. This femininity is reflected in Esther's body language, one example being how she frequently stood or leaned against something with her hands on her hips. Coupled with her confident

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[88] Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, "Pre-Text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," in *Hollywood Musicals, The Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (Routledge, 2007), 78-79.
[89] Pullen, 79.
[90] "What's She Got?" *Modern Screen,* October 1954, 55.
[91] Pullen, 86-88.
[92] Fagan, 26.
[93] Tania Modleski, "Introduction: Hitchcock, Feminism and the Patriarchal Unconscious" in *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York and London: Methuen, Inc., 1988), 2.

demeanor, this stance was like a power pose that Esther could use in any circumstance. It could convey her anger toward a leading man; her relaxed attitude as she talked with friends; or her contemplation of a situation. Regardless of the context, Esther's hands-on-the-hips stance asserts a dominance that typically is coded masculine as she enlarges her space in the frame and shows off her sturdy shoulders and, depending on the clothes, her toned arms (figure 5). Interestingly, this pose is often displayed during moments where she physically confronts the unwanted advances of a leading man, like when she smashes a glass vase on Ricardo Montalbán's finger in *Neptune's Daughter* and twists Johnnie Johnston's nose in *This Time for Keeps*.

Figure 5: an example of Esther's hands-on-hips pose, shown here in This Time for Keeps *right before she tweaks a lying Johnnie Johnston's nose (screen capture)*

Because she is the center of her films' universes, Esther's leading men often have to fight against her overwhelming presence. With the exceptions of *Andy Hardy's Double Life* (an entry in an established series that was also her cinematic debut), *A Guy Named Joe* (she only appears in one scene), *Ziegfeld Follies* (a 1946 all-star revue), *The Hoodlum Saint* (a William Powell drama), and *The Big Show* (her penultimate film),[94] Esther's movies—not just her aquamusicals—are about her characters and their struggles, triumphs, annoyances, and romances. Naturally, this affected her leading men. When asked who her favorite co-star was, Esther often replied "the water," explaining that the men who played opposite her were typically

> little more than interchangeable parts. Many of them…had been given roles in my movies so they could get a bit of experience and become better known. I would have preferred stronger leading men, but it's quite possible that a more prominent actor wouldn't want to hold my towel; and sometimes that was literally what happened in the plot.[95]

When she pursued Fernando Lamas for *Dangerous When Wet*, he initially turned her down because he didn't want to play second fiddle to her and only acquiesced when she promised to have his part expanded.[96] Instead of being given the chance to work with the likes of Clark Gable, Cary Grant, or Gary Cooper, Esther played her love scenes with Johnnie Johnston, Barry Sullivan, and John Carroll. While she found this frustrating, it did allow her to take more of the spotlight than might have been possible with bigger names.

Take Me Out to the Ball Game, co-starring Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra, is an example of what might have happened had Esther gotten her wish of stronger leading men. The film,

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[94] Unfortunately, Esther's final film, *The Magic Fountain* (1961), which was directed by and co-starred Fernando Lamas, is not available in any kind of format.
[95] Williams, 153.
[96] When Esther recounted this story to Robert Osborne in her *Private Screenings* episode, her word choice is revealing when she remarks that Lamas was "getting the opportunity to be in the picture with me," which points out that she was the bigger star.

based on an idea by Stanley Donen and Kelly, originally had Judy Garland in the role of baseball team owner K.C. Higgins, but when she had to drop out and was replaced by Esther, a new draft of the script was written, presumably to better suit the new actress's persona.[97] The whole production is a fascinating look at what happened when MGM's mermaid was taken from her aquamusical and put into a more conventional, song-and-dance musical. They try to accommodate Esther's swimming by shoehorning in a scene where she sings the title tune to herself while doing laps in a pool, but when director Busby Berkeley came up with a dream sequence that would incorporate swimming and dramatize the romantic longing between Esther and Kelly's characters, Kelly vehemently nixed the idea and instead put together a duet for them to the song "Baby Doll." Esther was less than thrilled: "The song had obviously been written for five-foot-two-inch June [Allyson] or Judy [Garland], not for Esther, who was nobody's 'baby.'"[98] Ultimately, there was a problem while filming and the number was cut.[99] While K.C. Higgins is still very much the kind of resilient character Esther excelled at playing and the film was a hit, *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* became Gene Kelly's film more than anyone else's and it made Esther realize that at this point in her career, "I wasn't used to a back seat."[100] In other words, the tradeoff of dominance over a film for an actor whose level of stardom matched hers was not something Esther could wholly accept.

Tellingly, her best leading men were the ones who got into the water with her. Out of approximately twenty actors, seven swam alongside her: Van Johnson, Ricardo Montalbán, John

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[97] "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," AFI Catalog.
[98] Williams, 171.
[99] "Baby Doll" has survived as an outtake on the film's DVD, and seeing it does confirm how ill-suited Esther was for such a cutesy number.
[100] Williams, 171.

Bromfield, Lamas, Howard Keel, Peter Lawford, and Mickey Rooney.[101] In musicals, there is the unspoken rule that the couple who sings and/or dances together stays together, their musical compatibility a "metaphor for the perfection of their relationship."[102] It could be said that the same concept applies to swimming in Esther's films. What complicates this is the fact that in reality only Lamas could swim. Esther admits that in order to do the romantic swimming duet, she had to discreetly hold the men afloat herself or have them walk on ramps that were concealed underwater,[103] an emasculation that was hidden from the public.

The last of these duets came in her final aquamusical, *Jupiter's Darling*. Forced to swim across a river, Esther's character realizes that Keel's can't swim and is afraid of learning, despite presenting himself as this big, intimidating he-man. Deeply amused, she keeps him afloat by holding his head above the water, happily chatting while he sputters and flails. The contrast between her cheerful ease and his awkward discomfort can't help but feel like a commentary on Esther and her unskilled co-stars. Interestingly enough, it would appear that Esther's real husband, Ben, had to prove his own compatibility with his wife by demonstrating that he could swim. Numerous fan magazine photos show Ben relaxing with Esther in or around a pool (e.g. "We Could Write a Book,"[104] "This Love of Ours," "Make Hers Old-Fashioned,"[105] "Esther Williams Life Story,"[106] "Fiesta!"[107]) as if to confirm to the public that they are indeed well-matched (figure 6).

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[101] My criteria for this overall number of twenty was any man whose character actively pursues a romance with Esther's even if they don't end up together, like Jack Carson in *Dangerous When Wet* and Frank Sinatra in *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*. For this discussion, I also excluded *The Hoodlum Saint*'s William Powell and *The Unguarded Moment*'s George Nader since their films don't have any swimming scenes and therefore their characters couldn't have swum with hers.
[102] Arbuthnot and Seneca, 83.
[103] Williams, 227.
[104] Jane Wilkie, "We Could Write a Book," *Modern Screen,* April 1955.
[105] Louella Parsons, "Make Hers Old-Fashioned," *Photoplay*, April 1951.
[106] Kirtley Baskette, "Esther Williams Life Story," *Modern Screen,* June 1946.
[107] Herb Howe, "Fiesta!" *Photoplay*, July 1946.

Figure 6: an example of the Gages doing a swimming photo shoot, "Fiesta!" Photoplay*, July 1946 (Media History Digital Library)*

In a bizarre way, Esther's best onscreen partners were Tom and Jerry, the iconic cartoon duo she swam with in *Dangerous When Wet*. Not only did they not need her assistance, they could keep up with her during the whole seven-and-a-half-minute underwater sequence, the difficulties of which Esther outlined in her book:

> It is quite a challenge to swim the crawl and backstroke underwater. … In order to keep yourself under the surface, your toes must be pointed downward (an unnatural and ungainly position), and your arms must stroke laterally, a technique that demands a

> powerful upper body. Oh yes, don't forget that while you're doing this, you've got dialogue. And don't forget to smile![108]

While she didn't film the entire sequence in one fell swoop, Esther did try to stay submerged for as long as she could in all of her underwater routines in order to create long, unbroken takes. The idea that only cartoon characters could truly match her skill level is a testament to her seemingly superhuman abilities.

Because Esther was so much more proficient in the water than her leading men, she proved herself to be athletically superior, which in turn allowed her to claim the water as her own space.[109] While others may join her from time to time, the spotlight—both literal and figurative—is not theirs. Their placement and movement are relational to Esther, and they never do a stunt that Esther herself (or rather the Esther we are presented with, if a double is used) cannot do. No one outshines her. Her "chlorines," the female synchronized swimmers who swam behind her in her most outrageous routines, are interesting to consider here because although they were there to add to the grandeur and the enormous scale, they also demonstrated more athleticism than Esther's leading men and thus performed as a strong female collective (figure 7). When the production of *Bathing Beauty* was covered by *LIFE Magazine*, the story emphasized these women and their labor, reporting that they "do more than splash their toes" as they swam two miles daily for seven weeks. The accompanying photos show the women getting ready in their dressing room, rehearsing their formations, and filling cups from a water cooler because "swimmers were subject to cramps and overexertion."[110] Similar to the chlorines, the

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[108] Williams, 229-230.
[109] Off the screen, in addition to the pools MGM and Cypress Gardens built for her, Esther also took ownership over the saucer tank that Johnny Weissmuller had used for his Tarzan movies, transforming what had been a man's space into a woman's.
[110] "*Bathing Beauty*," *LIFE Magazine*, April 17, 1944, 80-81.

men who occasionally joined these big routines were there to enhance the spectacle, yet more often than not, their job was not to swim alongside Esther—it was to wear tiny swim shorts and stand around looking pretty, rendering their musculature more ornamental than functional (figure 8). There are also moments where Esther uses her spatial connection to the water to keep herself distanced from her male co-stars. *Neptune's Daughter, Texas Carnival, Dangerous When Wet*, and *Easy to Love* all have scenes where she jumps into or stays in a body of water in order to avoid dealing with a leading man.

Figure 7: Esther and the female collective in This Time for Keeps *(screen capture)*

Figure 8: Esther surrounded by the male collective in Duchess of Idaho *(screen capture)*

In the 1930s, when Esther first began competing, the swimming pool's purpose was for public recreation and athletic competitions. However, with water shows like the Aquacade, the success of films like the Tarzan series, and the increasingly revealing swimsuits of both men and women, swimming became entwined with ideas of fantasy, the pool and its water a site where you could enjoy "the savoring of weightlessness, the adventurous call of the jungle, the carnal joy of the erotic."[111] This spirit was infused into the aquamusical, as Esther's pool offered wonderous visuals, daring stunts, and plenty of half-naked performers who warmly smile at the camera as their wet swimsuits cling to their glistening bodies. With the help of celebrity photoshoots and films like Esther's that glorified the fun of the swimming pool,[112] after WWII

[111] Thomas A.P. van Leeuwen, *The Springboard in the Pond: An Intimate History of the Swimming Pool* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 180.
[112] Film examples include *The Cameraman* (1928), *Dancing Lady* (1933), *Footlight Parade* (1933), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), and *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941).

the pool transformed into a status symbol that became part of the American dream and the home of the American family.[113]

Esther contributed to this by not only swimming through watery dreamscapes on the silver screen but by selling pools herself when she became a spokesperson in 1951 for the International Swimming Pool Company of White Plains, New York and later owned her own pool manufacturing business. The emphasized family values of the 1950s, Esther's star text, and the desired attainability of the pool intersect in a 1955 commercial she and Ben did to promote the Esther Williams Swimming Pool Pak, an in-ground pool installation kit from the International Swimming Pool Company. With the commercial set up as a series of home movies shot and narrated by the Gages, the couple present the Pool Pak, and the swimming pool in general, as affordable, easy to maintain, essential for your health and happiness, and "practically a necessity for every family." While focused on imagery like the Gages swimming with their children and the home of their "friends" the Ford family, marking the pool as a domestic space, the commercial also registers Esther's spatial connection to the pool. The Gages' marriage and home life may be the framework for the commercial, but it is *her* name on the installation kit and it is *her* involvement that appeals to consumers. Nothing demonstrates this more than when the camera pans up from Esther's foot pointing at the Esther Williams Pool Pak logo to her beaming face as Ben's narration assures the viewer of the kit's quality:

> All of this was carefully observed and finally given the stamp of approval by the one person who knows more about what a swimming pool should be than anyone anywhere: Esther Williams.

[113] Van Leeuwen, 180.

Because of her athletic and cinematic exploits, Esther is deemed a swimming pool expert, someone who knows that space more intimately and proficiently than anyone else. This isn't too much of a stretch actually, considering that at the age of eight she learned to swim in order to inaugurate her new neighborhood pool, even though "almost no girls were [athletic] in those days; sports were considered sweaty and unfeminine."[114] The pool became the space where Esther could substantiate that "it's alright to be strong and feminine at the same time,"[115] as she once said.

In addition to pools, Esther publicly advocated for swimming as an activity for exercise and leisure. She published articles like "How to Conquer Your Fear of Water"[116] in fan magazines; gave swim lessons to visually handicapped children in her spare time; and released an instructional video in the 1980s called *Swim, Baby, Swim* to help parents teach their own kids. Furthermore, Esther wrote and posed for an entry in a line of how-to books called *Get in the Swim*, as well as an informational booklet that was provided with your purchase of a Cole of California swimsuit (figure 9). Both materials are filled with Esther's advice on matters like breathing techniques, different kicks, and how to do various strokes. In her autobiography, she recalls how she and her mother would create information packets for female fans who would ask how they could start their own synchronized swimming group.[117] The International Swimming Hall of Fame summed up Esther's impact best when she was inducted in 1966:

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[114] Williams, 23.
[115] Ronald Bergan, "Esther Williams Obituary," Guardian News and Media, *The Guardian*, June 6, 2013, www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jun/06/esther-williams-dies-91.
[116] Esther Williams as told to May Mann, "How to Conquer Your Fear of Water," *Movie Fan*, February 18, 1952.
[117] Williams, 394.

> Her movie career played a major role in the promotion of swimming, making it attractive to the public, contributing to the growth of the sport as a public recreation for health, exercise, water safety -- and just plain fun.[118]

For Esther, selling pools and promoting the benefits of swimming were akin to a public service. On the screen, however, Esther's swimming was perhaps less educational and more about tapping into the idea of swimming as leisure. Beginning in the 1920s, the pool was intended to be a place for community-building and play,[119] a concept reflected in Esther's films as she used her pool to unwind, to perform for an audience, and to swim with others, like a romantic interest.

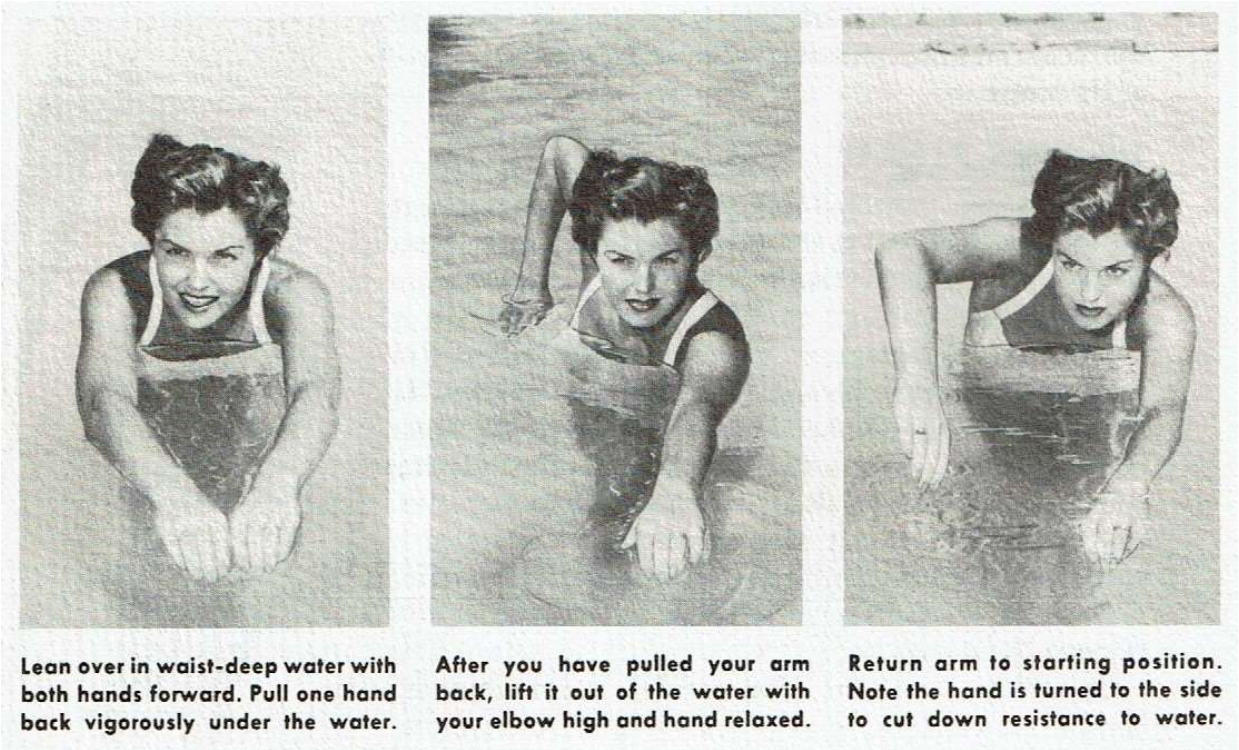

Figure 9: Esther does a demonstration in her Cole of California booklet "Tips on Swimming"

[118] "Esther Williams (USA) – 1966 Honor Contributor," International Swimming Hall of Fame, archived on the Wayback Machine on June 9, 2013. https://web.archive.org./web/20130609094024/http://www.ishof.org/Honorees/66/66ewilliams.html.

[119] Jeff Wiltse, "The 'Swimming Pool Age': 1920 to 1940" in *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 88.

In the aquamusicals, the swimming of Esther's characters was a representation of their independence. Physically and mentally, it gave them the ability to do what they wanted with their bodies and to feel good about it. Economically, in most cases, it gave them an income and financial freedom that wasn't tied up with a man's as they supported themselves with livings as actresses, aqua stars, swimming instructors, swimsuit designers, and carnival performers. Esther became a star at the beginning of WWII, a time when women were finding more freedom outside of the home. As Pullen points out, the independence of Esther's characters didn't disappear or even diminish in her post-WWII films, when Hollywood movies "stopped suggesting that wartime shortages justified women doing the same jobs as men."[120] What is crucial to call attention to is that the love interests of Esther's characters were rarely bothered by this independence. They love to watch her swim, so much so that some even dream about it (*Pagan Love Song, Texas Carnival, On an Island with You*) and others work to secure her jobs as a swimmer (*Bathing Beauty, Easy to Love, Million Dollar Mermaid*). While the men's enjoyment of her shimmying and gliding through the water in a tight bathing suit is certainly sexual to some degree, the films' focus on her athleticism and autonomy seems to prioritize their gazing as more appreciative than lustful as they recognize, and often compliment, her unique skill.

As numerous scholars have mentioned in their own work, Mulvey's influential analysis of the politics of looking identified and explored the concept of the male gaze, a patriarchal tool that renders women objects rather than subjects of their own gaze. Regardless of a film's narrative, Mulvey believed that the look of the camera presented the male gaze as dominant and the female gaze as virtually nonexistent. This idea is far too limiting in its scope, however, and

[120] Pullen, 80.

fails to take into account the experience of the female viewer and how the star text plays into the gaze. As Jackie Stacey writes, "Cinemas offered women a physical escape from the hardships of their lives,"[121] an escape that gave the female spectator "the possibility…to leave her world temporarily and become part of the star's world."[122] With her persona as a practical, self-reliant careerwoman and her obviously muscular, tall body, Esther and her characters presented a world where a woman thrived as her personal and career goals were achieved and whose strength didn't compromise her femininity or her aspirations.

In Esther's film and TV work, the spectator is often asked to identify with her character. For example, there are specific moments that invite us into her emotional state that could be taken out of the text without ruining the narrative: close-ups of her crying alone on a plane (*Bathing Beauty*) and in her empty room (*Thrill of a Romance*) after her heartbreak has already been clearly established in the previous scene; her cathartic swim in *Skirts Ahoy!* after a fight with her love interest; the Tom and Jerry dream sequence that depicts the struggles we already know she is facing with her English Channel swim; a throwaway scene in *On an Island with You* where she is walking down a hotel hallway, visibly upset by events, but is forced to offer a quick smile for a paparazzo before disappearing into her room… These moments reinforce that the problems of the film (or TV episode) are her problems; her actions and her desires are what dictate the narrative.

In addition to her script contributions and her star presence, Esther was able to initiate some semblance of a female gaze with her body and her performance as an actor. It can't be denied that the image of her curvaceous figure in a swimsuit is sexually charged, but Esther's immense poise and the noticeable enjoyment she takes in swimming indicate pride in her body

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[121] Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood and Female Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 95.
[122] Ibid, 117.

and its athleticism, and, according to Stacey, this kind of "confidence, sophistication, and self-assurance…were perceived by female spectators as desirable and inspirational."[123] Esther radiates a power that muddles the idea of the male gaze because she is so plainly in control of her body and how it is displayed.[124]

Part of that control lies in the sexual desires of her characters. In *Bathing Beauty*, when she finds herself newly reconciled with her husband, she has him carry her over the threshold of his room and implies that she wants to be put on the bed by pointedly looking at it. Disappointed that he nervously put her on a desk instead, she moves onto his lap, stroking his hair and kissing him (figure 10). In her next film, *Thrill of a Romance*, she is climbing up the ladder of a diving board at a public pool when a stranger—the man she ends up marrying—asks if she minds if he watches her dive. She subtly looks him over and says with a small smile, "Not at all," demonstrating that she is attracted to him as well. A similar scene occurs in *Easy to Love* as Tony Martin's crooner character looks at her intensely across a room while singing "Look Out! I'm Romantic." Filmed in shot/reverse shot, Esther returns his look with an inviting one of her own (figure 11). When her boss, Van Johnson, jealously quips that he bet Martin can't even swim, Esther suggestively replies, "I'd sure love to teach him."

Easy to Wed, Duchess of Idaho, and *Skirts Ahoy!* also have scenes of Esther actively seducing a leading man. *Skirts Ahoy!* is especially noteworthy because the main conflict between Esther's character Whitney and Barry Sullivan's character Paul is that she is the pursuer in the

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[123] Stacey, 154.

[124] It should also be noted that in *Dangerous When Wet* and *Million Dollar Mermaid*, we're explicitly asked to see Esther's body for its incredible athleticism as we witness the intensity of her characters' long-distance swimming and training: Katy is covered in goose fat to keep warm in the water; Annette's face becomes physically dirty; and their exhausted bodies become increasingly limp. The films' drama is heightened during these swims as well, with ominous musical scores and worried bystanders highlighting the demands on their athleticism even more.

relationship and he can't handle it (figure 12). In the end, Whitney doesn't apologize for the way she behaved but rather for the fact that it made him uncomfortable. "I still believe in asking for what I want," she adds. "All I've learned is not to count on getting it." Amazingly enough, Paul accepts this and they're finally united.

Figure 10: Esther and Red Skelton in Bathing Beauty *(screen capture)*

Figure 11: Esther looking at Tony Martin in Easy to Love *(screen capture)*

Figure 12: Esther and Vivian Blaine light Barry Sullivan's cigarette in Skirts Ahoy! *(screen capture)*

A happy resolution is typical of the aquamusical, but there is more to these endings than just Esther successfully winning the man of her dreams. Although heterosexual coupledom in patriarchal classic Hollywood implies female containment, Esther was able to avoid such a fate. Tanner writes that in women's sports cinema, there exists a paradox where the female athletes adhere to society's feminine ideal but also can't because of their masculine traits. These traits threaten the "hegemonic order of gender," thus necessitating the containment of these athletes.[125] Greg Faller says that this containment can be found in the aquamusical's emphasis on romance,[126] but also concedes that

> Williams, if not contained by the social values embodied by the narrative and by certain aspect of her star-image, offers a dynamic role model to the spectator which champions

[125] Tanner, 94.
[126] Greg Faller, *The Function of Star-Image and Performance in the Hollywood Musical: Sonja Henie, Esther Williams, and Eleanor Powell* (Northwestern University, PhD dissertation, 1987), 272.

> athleticism, self-awareness, and independence, and may question the underpinnings of patriarchy.[127]

Fagan agrees that, despite the anxieties that Esther's active body creates, her films often fail in containing the actress.[128] She writes that Esther's characters had an agency that distanced them from the traditional domestic sphere, and yet the narratives' romance would suggest that the career of Esther's characters would be weakened or even ended altogether by the final reel.[129] However, these women destabilize the narrative by escaping this containment, an escape that Pullen says is made possible by Esther's formidable body and her self-sufficiency in the water, both of which dilute the films' courtship-based plots.[130]

According to Faller, by the end of her films, Esther no longer represents an "idealized goddess" when her character inevitably unites with the leading man, thus "submitting to the wishes of the male lead."[131] But isn't that her character's wish as well? Why is this coded as "the wishes of the male lead?" Why can't romance be part of what a woman achieves, particularly when she proves that she can also accomplish things outside of the romantic sphere? As Molly Haskell emphasizes, when considering romance in film we must ask "whether it is possible to disentangle the neurotic and imprisoning aspects of love from its positive and liberating ones."[132] Basinger believes that the romance-focused ending does not negate what the rest of the film had shown up to that point, which was "a woman in power."[133] To Haskell, although many female characters from classic Hollywood were forced to conform and find romance as their ultimate

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[127] Faller, 300.
[128] Fagan, 18.
[129] Ibid, 120.
[130] Pullen, 23.
[131] Faller, 293.
[132] Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), xvi.
[133] Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), 13.

goal, when it comes to the actresses who portrayed them, these are not the images that become rooted in our conscious.[134] Furthermore, as Stacey says, the confidence and power of these ladies are "remembered as offering female spectators the pleasure of participation in qualities they themselves lacked and desired."[135]

Haskell writes that a star's personality was equally as important as the roles they played and also influenced the creation of said roles.[136] The musical was the perfect vehicle, then, for Esther, since it is, in Cohan's words, "a star-driven genre" whose coherence comes from the lead actors.[137] Cohan notes the connection between the musical star's performance and the audience, explaining that since the star addresses the camera/audience while doing a musical number, there is a sense that they are presenting their authentic self, one that is not facilitated by script or director.[138]

In her book-length exploration of Alfred Hitchcock's work, Modleski observes a "strong fascination and identification with femininity" that undermines the authority of the male characters and the male director, an element that is also found in Esther's filmography.[139] To paraphrase Faller, because a star's performance disrupts the film's narrative, the star is granted a visual power that enables them to dictate the mise-en-scene, the direction, and the editing as they simultaneously exhibit their skills and control the spectator's gaze.[140] In watching *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Arbuthnot and Seneca discovered that because the romantic narrative was constantly interrupted by other elements, they came to consider the romance as a pre-text, a story

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[134] Haskell, 3.
[135] Stacey, 158.
[136] Haskell, 5.
[137] Cohan, 12.
[138] Ibid, 13.
[139] Modleski, 3.
[140] Faller, 288.

that "co-exists with, contradicts, and disguises another, more central text," such as the friendship between Monroe and Russell's characters,[141] or in the case of Esther the strength and dominance of her and her characters. Romance is indeed inevitable in Esther's films, but it is interrupted by her swimming and her moments of professional and personal ambition. For example, in *Dangerous When Wet*, Esther falls for a dashing Frenchman, but she is much more concerned about training to swim the English Channel and saving her family's dairy farm.

The eroticism found in Esther's routines and her swimsuited body may have distracted audiences from realizing what all her films had to offer. Similar to how aquamusicals were "fluff," swimsuit shots were "cheesecake," images that exist for the sexual pleasure of the (heterosexual male) viewer. And yet Esther's presence weakens these labels thanks to her muscular body, confident stance, and intelligent, self-reliant characters. Everybody, from photographers to moviegoers to MGM, clamored for Esther to regularly appear in a bathing suit, perhaps unaware of the power that that was allowing her to continually display in her films and in her publicity materials. Faller notes that while "cheesecake," or pin-up, shots were a part of every female star's career in classic Hollywood, they "remained an integral part of Williams's star-image throughout her tenure at MGM."[142] What complicated the meaning of her pin-ups was the contrast between her "voluptuous body" and such traits as "health, athleticism, humor, unpretentiousness, innocence, potential romantic partner, wife, and mother," thus diffusing the notion of Esther as "an object of lasciviousness."[143]

Offscreen, Esther's status as a mother and a wife was unavoidable. Because the beginning and ending of her Hollywood career roughly coincided with her marriage to and

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[141] Arbuthnot and Seneca, 78.
[142] Faller, 262.
[143] Ibid, 265.

divorce from Ben Gage, it seems that every magazine story, interview, news snippet, or gossip column had to mention him, their children, and/or their home. Ben's prevalence in Esther's star text is interesting to contemplate. A radio singer whose celebrity came more from being Esther's husband than anything else, Ben became a fixture in her publicity and her public persona. Their marriage captivated fans and reporters, especially since it was a Hollywood relationship where it was the woman who had more financial power and fame than the man. Early stories about their marriage swooned over their life together, but as Esther's popularity grew, so did the gossip about the imbalance in their relationship. *Modern Screen* interviewed a source who claimed that Esther's "ambition and industry" were "dangerous" because it enabled her to be "more successful than her husband."[144] *Photoplay* suggested that she was "domineering" and that their troubles stemmed from Ben being "dependent upon her decisions."[145] While some articles tried to paint Ben as the head of Esther's businesses, others weren't buying it:

> Because a man is supposed to have more business ability than a woman, Esther has created the myth that she's just a helpless little girl where dollars are concerned, and she hates to talk about money, and isn't it lucky for her that she has a great big, strong financial genius like Ben to handle all their money matters?[146]

In her autobiography, Esther admitted that they were often just "keeping up appearances" and that many of their businesses were secretly struggling precisely because she put Ben in charge of them.[147] The presentation of the Gages as a power couple was so valuable that along with their public appearances and assurances to the press that they had a happy marriage, they also collaborated on a 45rpm record titled *For Sentimental Reasons*. Released by MGM Records in

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[144] "What's the Trouble, Esther?" *Modern Screen,* December 1952, 92.
[145] Eve Ford, "What Hollywood is Whispering About: Esther and Ben," *Photoplay,* January 1953, 45.
[146] Sheilah Graham, "Thank Heavens I Can Swim!" *Photoplay,* August 1952, 86.
[147] Williams, 243.

1954, it features four songs in total: two solos for Ben; Esther singing "Never Let Me Go," whose lyrics the record credits to Ben and Esther; and a duet between them on "I Don't Know Why (I Just Do)." Revealingly, though, only Esther is on the cover, suggesting that although both of their names are on the record, she is the reason why people will want it.

Onscreen, Esther never played a mother and only played a wife in *Bathing Beauty*, whose plot complications keep her separated from her husband until the end, and in *Thrill of a Romance*, which has her workaholic spouse abandoning her on their honeymoon, leading her to fall for Van Johnson. Esther's characters happily interact with children (she even does a swimming routine with them in *Skirts Ahoy!* and her Cypress Gardens special) and it is a foregone conclusion that her romances are going to end in her walking down the aisle (this is classic Hollywood, after all), but as noted by Fagan, her characters were "not associated with the domestic space and its gendered roles," which was in contrast with the other actresses of her time.[148] It is as if the vast publicity surrounding her real-life motherhood and marriage gave her the opportunity to avoid being a wife and mother on the big screen and instead portray single careerwomen who didn't seek romance but rather stumbled into it, many times reluctantly.

An Esther Williams character was never clumsy, ditzy, or bad at what they do. She projected such a solid image of intelligence, confidence, and practicality that it wouldn't have been believable if she had tried to play someone who was easily flustered or adorably naïve. Esther's women voice their desires, freely move about any space they are in, and frequently stay career-driven, all while achieving professional and personal, specifically romantic, success. Although her athleticism is what marks her as a unique star, to only focus on that aspect of her talent would ignore the fierce women she portrayed out of the water.

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[148] Fagan, 106.

Esther's cinematic introduction in *Andy Hardy's Double Life* is perfect in that it immediately establishes her star persona and her athleticism.[149] Esther plays college student Sheila Brooks, a friend of Andy's on-again-off-again girlfriend Polly (Ann Rutherford) who assists Polly in playing a trick on her troublesome beau by pretending to be interested in him. The sequence where Andy and Sheila meet is almost dream-like in the way it unfolds. As Andy relaxes on Polly's diving board with his eyes closed, Sheila strolls in wearing a two-piece bathing suit and greets him (figure 13). Upon seeing her, he does a double take and walks off the board into the pool; she pulls him out and then, without saying a word, kisses him, causing him to fall back into the water.

After explaining that she is majoring in psychology at college and therefore wanted to startle him to test his reaction, she gracefully dives into the pool, followed by a very ungraceful Andy. Underwater, the juxtaposition between their bodies is obvious—while Sheila's long frame glides beautifully through the water, Andy's short body and frantic motions betray his lack of skill, especially as he attempts to chase her and she effortlessly evades him until she decides to give him what *Photoplay* described as "an underwater kiss that no other girl in pictures could have done and which nearly killed Mickey Rooney."[150]

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[149] *Andy Hardy's Double Life* was released first, but Esther's first film was actually *A Guy Named Joe*. She got the role of USO hostess Ellen Bright after telling MGM that she wanted some experience in front of the camera before making *Andy Hardy*, which she knew was going to function as her big introduction to movie audiences (Williams 95).

[150] Susan Peters, "My Hollywood Friends," *Photoplay,* January 1946, 92.

Figure 13: Esther greets an instantly smitten Mickey Rooney in Andy Hardy's Double Life *(screen capture)*

Throughout the film, per Polly's plan, Sheila offers herself as a sexual fantasy, a young woman who looks fantastic in a bathing suit, readily gives out kisses, and even asks you to put sun oil on her bare back. The important thing is that Sheila is willfully putting on this performance. She knows how to get under Andy's skin and she doesn't just use her body to do it. Her intellect is emphasized as much as her appearance, with Polly introducing her as "very intelligent" and Andy admitting, "I never expected to meet a girl that'd be brighter than I am." Sheila talks incessantly about psychology, demonstrating that it is a subject she is deeply interested in, and she always maintains control whenever she and Andy are together.

Esther's persona resonated so thoroughly that even when she acted in straight dramas, her characters kept their defiant spirit and boldness. In *A Guy Named Joe* (Victor Fleming, 1943), she appears in one scene as a USO hostess who enthusiastically asks Van Johnson's shy soldier to dance. Although her beauty is foregrounded initially thanks to Spencer Tracy pointing her out

to Johnson and insisting she is a "honey" and a "dish," as she and Johnson talk we learn she has been trying to cheer up a homesick soldier for days now, revealing her to be an empathetic, friendly woman who isn't afraid to approach men. That same essence can be found in *The Hoodlum Saint*'s Kay Lorrison, a writer for a women's column who often puts her love interest, William Powell's class-ambitious WWI veteran, in his place, such as when she throws a book at his head, tricks him into participating in an exhausting dance contest, or firmly declares after an unwelcome embrace, "My kisses are my property. I'm particular who I give them to." The box-office failure of *The Hoodlum Saint* seemed to signal to MGM that audiences didn't want to see Esther on dry land, and so her next non-aquamusical wouldn't come until ten years later in 1956, after she left her home studio because she didn't think Dore Schary valued her or the glamour and spectacle of her movies.[151]

Unable to replicate the aquamusical at another studio and facing the box-office decline of the film musical, Esther's Hollywood career now depended on her acting in other genres. Offered the enormous sum of $200,000 by Universal—"more than I ever made for a single film at MGM," Esther noted[152]—the actress accepted the part of high school music teacher Lois Conway in the creepy, melodramatic thriller *The Unguarded Moment* (Harry Keller, 1956). After a series of disturbing love notes escalates into attempted rape, Lois discovers her attacker is her student and beloved football player Leonard (John Saxon). With only George Nader's detective on her side, Lois is disbelieved and ostracized by her co-workers, and yet she still boldly confronts Leonard and his domineering, woman-hating father (Edward Andrews) numerous times. Although her compassion for Leonard and his abusive home life makes her forgive him much too easily, Lois's fearlessness and tenacity are to be admired as she pursues the truth and

[151] "Esther Williams," *Private Screenings*.
[152] Williams, 282.

challenges the misogyny of a school that would rather believe a popular teenage boy than a competent female teacher whose lack of a husband is mentioned by literally every man she encounters.

In Esther's next film, *Raw Wind in Eden* (Richard Wilson, 1958), she plays a fashion model named Laura who has just ended an affair with a married man when his friend, Wally, invites her to spend the weekend on the Italian coast. After she and Wally crash his small plane on a remote island, they're forced to seek shelter with an elderly Italian man, his daughter Costanza, and a mysterious American named Moore (Jeff Chandler) as they wait to be rescued. Once again, Esther is portraying a woman who pushes back against the male policing of her body and her sexuality. When Wally implies that he wants her to become his kept woman, she shuts him down: "Didn't Bill tell you I'm a working girl? That I always have been, that I earn my own living?" When the hot weather becomes unbearable, she sensibly chooses to wear shorts, unaware of the men's carnal stares, and gives a pair to Costanza, which infuriates the young woman's strict father. Throughout the film, Laura and Moore are at odds with one another because she believes he is using the island's isolation as a way to avoid his secret past (he is) and he believes she is a wanton woman who is sleeping with Wally (she is not). Despite this, Laura and Moore are drawn to one another, their romantic tension reaching its climax when she decides to go for a swim in the sea. Ignoring Moore's warnings that the tide is too rough, she ably swims against the strong waves as he nervously follows her on land. Once she is done, she tells Moore that she isn't sorry for worrying him, but he just wordlessly pulls her into a passionate kiss, which suggests that he finds her athleticism and her bravery attractive.

While Esther's characters are irrepressible in and out of the water, her dramatic films centralized her differently than the aquamusical did. She still retains the distinctive qualities of

her star persona, but the man's story becomes the focus, with the possible exception of *The Unguarded Moment*. It is as if without the spectacle of the musical to surround her, Hollywood struggled to give Esther the same level of mobility and potency. For example, in *Raw Wind in Eden*, Esther can have a career, survive a plane crash, display her swimming prowess, and help rebuild a wrecked boat with her bare hands, but she can't save the leading man when his life becomes threatened. She can warn him of the danger. She can plead with him to run away. She can even try to hold jealous Wally at gunpoint to force him into helping his romantic rival. But the leading man won't listen to her and Wally will just knock the gun out of her hands and tie her up until Moore is able to free her.

Esther's restrained power is especially clear in *The Big Show*. As Hillary, the wealthy socialite who falls in love with trapeze artist Josef (Cliff Robertson), the actress is top-billed and yet she is practically turned into a supporting player. She was treated similarly offscreen, recalling, "The production company Lippert showed every indication of treating me like a hired hand, not like a star."[153] Hillary is the type of Esther Williams character you'd expect. She is financially independent, good-humored, loyal, and physically active. There is even a truncated "sporty montage" that culminates in a scene where she and Josef go to a pool and she swims a few laps. Josef prefers to stay dry and read a book, but when he comically falls into the water and she laughs at him, it recalls her aquamusical partners who didn't know how to swim. That being said, the script would rather have Robertson be the big, tough leading man than let he and Esther be on equal footing.

In one scene, when Hillary rightfully questions why Josef and his siblings obey their tyrannical father, Josef murmurs, "If you shut up, you'd be the wonderful woman you really can

[153] Williams, 326.

be." Whereas past characters like Whitney from *Skirts Ahoy!*, Chris from *Duchess of Idaho*, or Julie from *Easy to Love* would have squared her shoulders and set him straight, Hillary playfully sinks down so she is looking up at him and says, "Yes, sir." Later, when they are engaged, she believes that he should leave the circus to become her business manager, an idea that so disgusts him, he calls the engagement off. She is presented as someone who doesn't understand that he loves being a performer and who wants to stick him in a suffocating Park Avenue office while she supports the both of them. The fact that Hillary is depicted by a woman who consistently put her body (and life) at risk and who frequently played adventurous performers makes this character development baffling and in the end she comes crawling back to Josef to admit she was wrong.[154] Dyer notes that "a star's apparent changelessness over a long period of time can be a source of charisma" and therefore "attempts by a star to change [their image] may meet with box-office failure."[155] Curiously, for Esther, the change wasn't in her image but in her genre. She was, fundamentally, still playing the same character and still enacting the same star text, but it was the subtraction of the musical that seemed to be the problem, recalling the previously mentioned Ed Sullivan article that cautioned athletes that their best bet in Hollywood was to make musicals.

It is a little trickier to ascertain how Esther fared in her TV work because not all of the programs she did are available, such as a 1961 episode of *The Bob Hope Show*, a 1960 episode of *Zane Grey Theater* that had her portraying a pioneer woman who "risks her life to aid a group of cholera victims,"[156] a 1955 appearance on the educational program *Omnibus* where she did a segment on swimming with the Yale swim team, and the *Esther Williams Aqua Special*. Another

[154] One has to wonder how different *The Big Show* would have been if the filmmakers hadn't dismissed Esther's suggested revisions.
[155] Dyer, 98.
[156] "Esther Williams: Filmography," IMDb.com, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0754293/.

unattainable TV credit was an episode of *Lux Video Theatre* entitled "The Armed Venus" (1957) wherein Esther played a red-lipped femme fatale embroiled in a murder mystery. In an interview with *TV Guide*, she explained that she saw the role as a test to "find out exactly how much…editing and cutting and retakes and all the other mechanics of movie-making had to do with my success as a star."[157] Although she continually tried to prove her dramatic worth, Esther could never escape her swimming image; this generated a conflict in her later career where she would insist that she could do more than the aquamusical but she still acquiesced to performing in bathing suits and sometimes, like on *Lux Video Theatre*,[158] she even requested that swimming make an appearance to appease the audience.

What justified these decisions was the success of something like *Esther Williams at Cypress Gardens*, which was viewed on more than half of all American TV sets.[159] Starring Esther as a fictionalized version of herself, the special is at its core a shorter version of an aquamusical as we watch Esther prepare for a show at the Gardens with her press agent (Joey Bishop) only to have her plans intruded on by a Persian prince (Fernando Lamas). They initially clash, but the prince swiftly woos her and their romance is consummated with a sensual swimming duet between Esther and Lamas, one of several routines scattered throughout the program. Although the aquamusical was over once Esther left MGM, the 1960 special hints at the sexier, more mature side of the genre that had progressed during that five-year hiatus. The same could be said for Esther. Divorced from Ben after a long separation and a publicized affair with Jeff Chandler, the special's fictionalized Esther was free to pursue a relationship with the handsome Prince Ahmed, just like the actual Esther was free to pursue a relationship with co-star

[157] "Venus with Arms," 10.
[158] Ibid, 11.
[159] Williams, 324.

(and eventual husband) Lamas. The majority of the program resembles what you would expect to see from an aquamusical—Esther and her leading man singing, comedic relief, distinctive swimming numbers, beautiful locations—but there are two routines that point out how the genre could have evolved.

The first is a burlesque-like number that shows Esther in a bright red bustier and fishnets leading a group of chorus girls into a pool as they seductively pose and swim underwater in time with a jazzy instrumental. One of Esther's home movies reveals that the sequence was originally much longer and started with Esther and the women dancing their way down a winding sidewalk as they strip off gloves, high heels, and jewelry before entering the pool. The sexuality of this entire sequence is more overt and confrontational than what audiences were used to seeing from their mermaid as she shimmies her breasts forward, twirls her discarded gloves, and thrusts her body around one of the underwater set's poles. Similarly, the swimming duet with Lamas feels more erotic and more thrilling than any other duet she performed with a leading man, and it isn't just because her primarily nude-colored swimsuit gives the illusion that she is wearing less than what MGM would've allowed. No, the main reason for the sequence's eroticism is that, thanks to Lamas's swimming skill, he is able to join her underwater, do the same tricks as her, and lift her out of the water in poses that force their bodies to embrace. Esther is still prioritized—she begins the sequence by singing an upbeat ode to "the Persian way of life;" she initiates the duet; she is the one who draws your eye as her costume's train ethereally floats underwater while she moves; and, with Lamas as her anchor, she creates with her body the routine's superb visuals—but the equality of her and Lamas's abilities elevates and fortifies the material.

The same year that this special came out, Esther had a guest role on the family sitcom *The Donna Reed Show* as Molly Duncan, an old friend of Donna Stone's who became a famous

fashion designer and is now visiting the Stones to determine whether or not she is prepared to marry a small-town doctor like Donna's husband Alex. A desirable and successful careerwoman, Molly is exactly the type of character that Esther specialized in, and the episode depicts the struggle between her sophisticated singledom and Donna's domestic bliss. The two women are appreciative of what the other have, and Molly's concerns about whether or not she could be happy in a marriage are legitimate, but ultimately she decides that "if you want happiness, you've got to give up a few things for your man." Her fiancé David, however, holds off on the engagement because he thinks her decision to settle down is "only a mood" after spending time with the Stones. When Alex tricks him into changing his mind by claiming that Molly couldn't be a good wife because she is a careerwoman, David angrily counters, "That's just why she can do anything she makes her mind to do! Why, she has imagination and independence! Why, I wouldn't marry anybody but Molly!" Although the episode is in favor of the kind of suburban, upper-middle-class values that are symbolized by the Stones, Molly's embodiment of Esther's star text temporarily unsettles their home life and compels Donna to reconsider—albeit briefly—the path of housewifery and motherhood that she chose for herself.

Conclusion

"I worked at a time when people had careers and then they just disappeared," Esther wistfully remarked in 1992, "and so I thought I'd disappear, but now you don't."[160] Today, Esther's legacy appears to be her impressive swimming spectaculars rather than who she was as a performer and a woman. Her influence is felt in such varied pieces as "Be Our Guest" from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1991; Bill Condon, 2017), Miss

[160] Liz Doup, "In the Swim Esther Williams Could Write a Book About Her Life as Hollywood's Leading Mermaid. But Why Make Waves?" *The Sun-Sentinel*, May 6, 1992, https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/fl-xpm-1992-05-06-9202060764-story.html.

Piggy's fantasy sequence in *The Great Muppet Caper* (Jim Henson, 1981), the Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Aeroplane" music video, and the Coen Brothers' *Hail, Caesar!* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2016). In 1984, she helped inaugurate synchronized swimming to the Olympic Games, a moment that Esther described as "sweet vindication" after years of fighting against the stigma of synchronized swimming as a non-sport.[161] Swimming pretty was still being equated to "fluff" rather than athleticism.

Perhaps that same feeling is what has prevented film and star studies from discussing Esther. It would be a mistake, though, to think that just because her films are escapist fare, they don't deserve serious attention. Esther may not have had the dramatic chops or the wide-ranging career of actresses like Greer Garson or Myrna Loy, but her presence and her swimming are still cathartically sublime for women. As Diane Sawyer said upon Esther's passing in 2013, she was "a pioneer for a lot of little girls who knew strength and daring when they saw it."[162] Everything that went into making Esther's aquamusicals was geared towards one thing: making movies that only one person, one *woman*, could make. The fact that that woman was a champion athlete disrupts notions of what an actress can be, what a genre like the musical can do, and what concepts such as cinematic heteronormative romance and female entrepreneurship can look like.

With a star text that negotiated questions of sexuality, femininity, female strength, and the function of the star text, Esther represented what women could be and what they already were. To quote Basinger, "She was more of a female role model than has ever been properly acknowledged."[163] There are many stigmas attached to classic Hollywood, a majority of which revolves around ideas of restriction and oppression, such as the Hays Code's censorship or the

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[161] Williams, 394.
[162] "Esther Williams Dead at 91." *ABC News*, June 6, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXGONrb8zvk.
[163] Basinger, 228.

lack of visibility for minorities. However, although it is not always obvious, the Golden Age of Hollywood could be quite subversive in its operations. There are many avenues that could be explored here, but the period's complicated relationship with women proves to be one of the most fascinating. Classic Hollywood has been seen as an entity that silenced, ignored, mocked, and even destroyed women, and yet it championed, celebrated, and loved them as well. Women, particularly actresses, thrived in Hollywood at this time and created a connection with female audiences that continues to inspire, confuse, and empower to this day. No one better exemplifies this than Esther Williams.

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